



Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



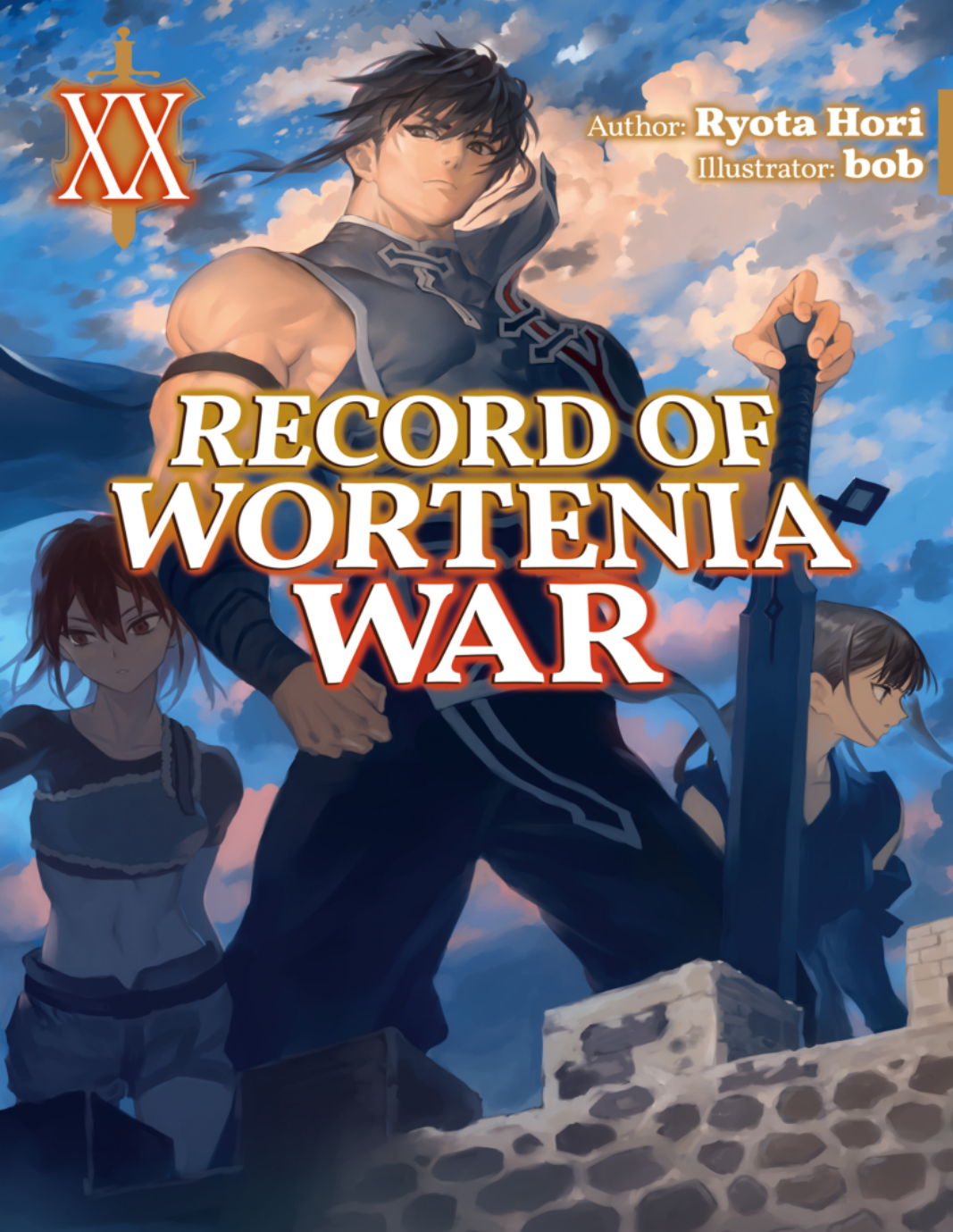




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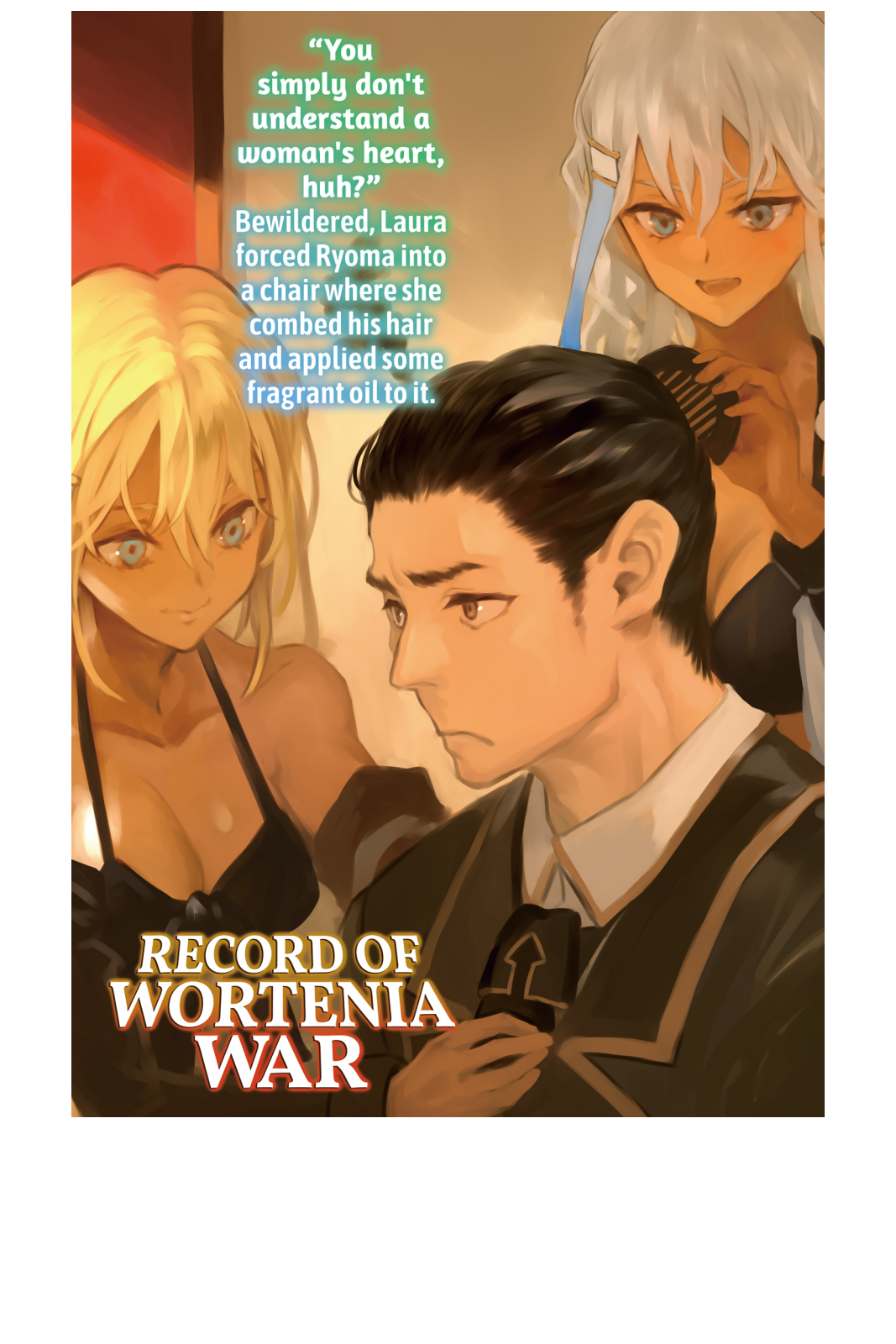
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**“You
simply don't
understand a
woman's heart,
huh?”**

**Bewildered, Laura
forced Ryoma into
a chair where she
combed his hair
and applied some
fragrant oil to it.**

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



“Fire arrows!”

The arrows hit the sails and hulls of the boats, sprouting smoke and flames wherever they struck.

The two men leading the charge howled in unison. It was like the roaring of beasts, and as they shouted, they also swung their long-handled weapons in sweeping motions.

An anime-style illustration of two female characters against a cloudy sky. On the left, a character with dark hair in a high ponytail with a red ribbon (Meltina) is placing a red cape over the shoulders of another character. The character on the right has long white hair, a blue visor on her forehead, and a blue necklace with a dark pendant. She has a serious expression. The text is overlaid on the lower left of the image.

Meltina placed
a cape she was
holding on her
queen's shoulders
and whispered
into her ear,
"Rest assured,
Your Majesty.
I promise I will
protect you
with my life."

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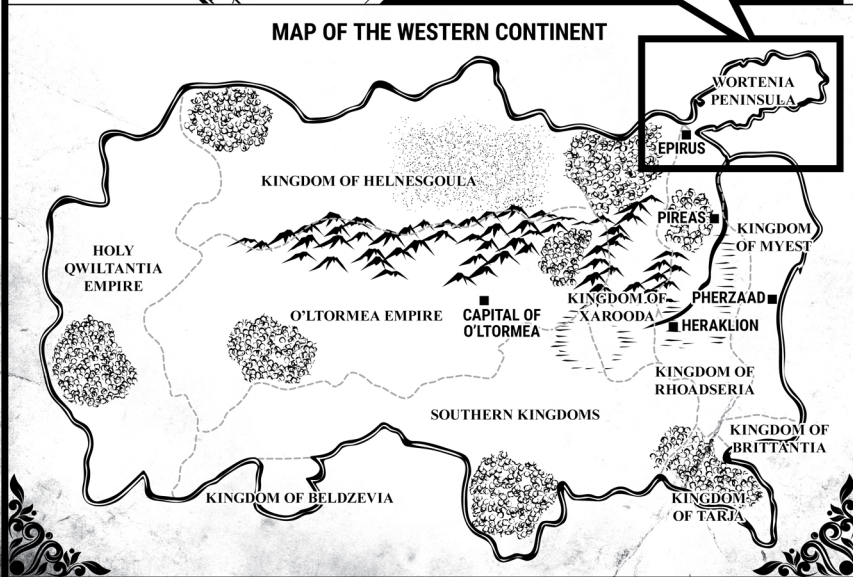
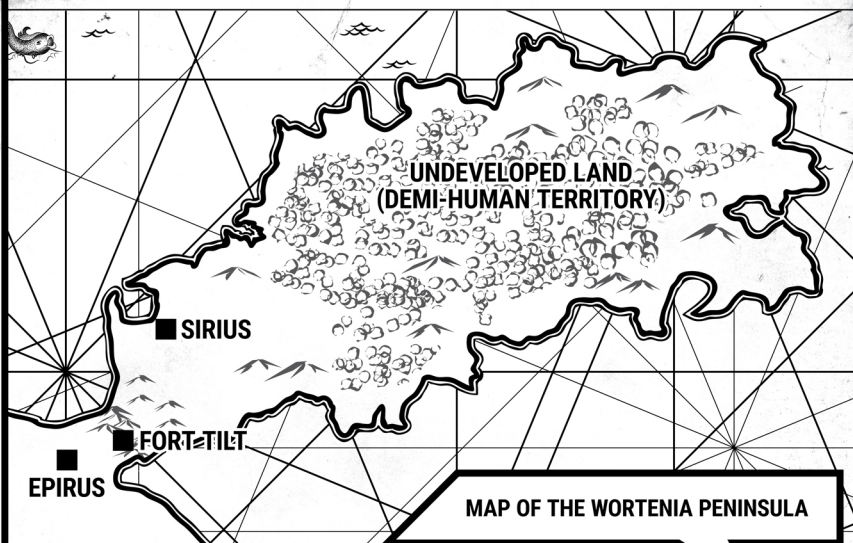
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WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



Prologue

In the three weeks since the subjugation army set up camp in front of Fort Tilt, they attempted to penetrate the defending Mikoshiba barony army's fortress through countless siege battles. Each time, Queen Lupis's army faced showers of arrows, boiling oil, and pebbles that cost them significant losses.

And the actual victims who paid for those losses with their bodies were interned in a tent set up in the subjugation army's encampment. But they were not sent there to be treated.

The sour scent of sweat, the stench of blood, and the pungent smell of pus oozing from wounds hung over the tent. Once this cocktail of odors assailed his nostrils, Adam grimaced in disgust.

Adam was an average middle-aged man whose appearance was relatively neat. He was wearing plate armor, implying he wasn't a first-time conscript for this battle. His short blond hair and well-kept mustache were further proof of this.

Nevertheless, he didn't look much like a member of the nobility. While he was clearly a capable knight, he looked less refined and more like a muddled mercenary who lived and died on the battlefield. But his appearance not matching his position was only natural. Even though Adam was a member of the Rhoadserian royal guard, he had a commoner background.

I never wanted to come to this place to begin with.

Such were Adam's honest emotions, yet he couldn't refuse an order from his superior. As such, he followed through and kept an eye on the injured, starting with this tent.

Besides, considering who gave me that order...

The man Adam had in mind wasn't his usual superior. His current superior officer was a member of a count family of some repute who took advantage of his pedigree to do as he pleased. This behavior made him one of the more unpleasant and uncouth members of the royal guard.

Of course, the man was not incompetent; he had achieved the rank of company commander in his midthirties. Still, talent didn't always match one's behavior and nature. While being in the royal guard guaranteed his commanding officer's position in society and paid him quite well, Adam still regarded him with scorn and distrust.

Besides, the man was only his superior within the framework of

the knight order; he wasn't his liege or leader. Adam's loyalty lay with Queen Lupis, not him. But his communications with her were limited to one time—during the decoration ceremony when he was given the title of knight and she told him she expected his loyal service.

A single knight with unextraordinary service meant only to occupy a post, like Adam, couldn't hope for a deeper connection with the queen. Regardless of what a knight said on the surface, they couldn't swear utmost loyalty to someone they hardly knew.

The fact that his direct commander was the scum of the earth made the situation much worse. He was as stuck-up and intolerable as most nobles were, and his only redeeming quality was his relatively well-kept appearance. There were many times when he charged Adam with unreasonable tasks and put him through a great deal of pain.

In such a work environment, knightly virtues and a retainer's self-discipline felt like nothing but empty platitudes. Despite his position, Adam had very little loyalty to his country and monarch.

However, he obviously couldn't be outspoken or vent his frustrations about the issue. Nobles and royalty being intolerably stuck-up was nothing new, but recklessly complaining or objecting to them would only result in him paying dearly for his insubordination. Though he was a low-ranking knight saddled with many menial tasks, Adam was still a member of the knight class who received a stable income. From a commoner's perspective, this was a blessing that was scarce and much better than having nothing to one's name.

With this position, Adam didn't feel motivated enough to fulfill the task given to him. At worst, he would much rather act like he was engaging in fieldwork while lazing about or pushing that task onto someone else.

But if Adam's secret sponsor ordered him to do this task, he wouldn't cut corners. After all, they paid him nearly ten times his usual wage and granted him all sorts of other benefits.

Even if he is on the wane right now, his power is not to be trifled with...

His sponsor was a man who once held the greatest authority in the Rhoadserian kingdom, with many nobles gathering under his banner during the previous civil war. While Queen Lupis and her allies' machinations had weakened his group's political power, diminishing it to a shadow of its former self, he still led the most prominent faction in Rhoadseria. So with that in mind, treating that man poorly was a suicidal act.

This was why people, Adam included, continued following his orders. Despite the hideous sight he faced now, that sense of duty felt irrelevant.

The stench is unbearable... The town I grew up in smelled terrible, but

this is even worse than that.

He pressed a cloth against his mouth and nose to block the stench, but it was so intense that it still suffocated him. In this world, baths were a rare and expensive commodity. Most commoners could only wash in rivers and streams running near their cities, and mercenaries that weren't lucky enough to have access to that had to make do with wiping with wet towels.

In modern society, body odor and smell harassment were major issues. If one were to neglect their hygiene to such an extent, people would move away from them in the outdoors or try to shut them away if they were indoors. Some people would even find fault with others over the fragrances applied to their wet tissues and hair products.

But this wasn't modern society, and that logic didn't apply. Cesspools and manure dumps were the only way to dispose of human excrement, and livestock was raised outside even in the cities. That made living in those places difficult for those not accustomed to the stench of animals.

Those of modern society weren't familiar with and thus couldn't stand the stench of animals, but this scent was the norm in this world. As such, the standard of what counted as "stench" to the commoners in a world with no hygiene standards was quite high.

In Adam's case, he was born in the slums of Pireas but had gained considerable social status and a better life. As far as the city's class system went, he came from the lowest of backgrounds, so his tolerance for bad smells was higher than most.

But the stench rising from this tent was intolerable, even for the people of this world and their low standards, and very few people could stand being around that tent. It was several times worse than any cesspool.

It smells like hell on earth. What a gruesome way of treating the injured. If I had to go through this, I'd have preferred they just put me out of my misery and be done with it.

The tent was near the subjugation army encampment by Fort Tilt, and over a dozen men were lying on mattresses inside it groaning and moaning in pain. Most of them were in a delirious state of half consciousness. Since they were still raising their voices in agony, they were likely alive but were in no condition to talk.

Adam looked at them with eyes full of pity. They were all soldiers who had recklessly charged against Fort Tilt only to meet painful resistance and retribution. Although they were the most unfortunate victims of the counterattack, they were also victims of the nobles' tyranny.

Before they could even reach the walls, they met a rain of arrows, and the abatis and empty moat blocked their advance. At this point,

over a third of the force had already been injured. But hell parted its jaws to spew its fury over them when they reached the walls. Cascades of boiling water and sizzling oil ran down the walls, and stones as large as an infant's head pelted down on them.

Many soldiers were supplied with wooden shields alongside their weapons. Unlike armor and helmets that needed to be adjusted to fit one's size, anyone could hold a shield regardless of their expertise. This made it a convenient and widely applicable piece of equipment.

Despite the shields being sturdy and reinforced with metal, giving them some defensive properties, they were still made of wood. Holding them overhead could only protect one for so long. After all, the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers were all capable of martial thaumaturgy. Even if all they did was throw stones, blocking just a few of them was impressive.

Under such conditions, conquering this firm fortress would be impossible, and it gave the subjugation army no choice but to retreat. This nightmarish outcome felt like nothing short of a wasted effort for the soldiers on the front line. The soldiers who died because of these reckless orders were truly unfortunate victims.



Just like there's always someone who's better off than you are, you'll always find people who are worse off too.

The people groaning painfully inside the tent were, without a doubt, worse off because they were simple commoners drafted into this war and carried off to this northern frontier. Yet the nobles that ordered them to come here regarded them as cattle. They weren't truly disposable since they were still needed to pay taxes, but a few dying took no skin off the nobles' backs.

But to make things worse, these particular "cattle" were injured so severely that they couldn't return to the battlefield after some recuperation. As cold as it might have been to admit it, even if they received proper treatment, it was unlikely their bodies would ever fully return to what they were before this battle.

Given the situation with the northern subjugation army, no one was inclined to care for these injured men. The siege of Fort Tilt was in a stalemate, and more and more soldiers died by the day as initial optimism gave way to wary caution.

Such a state gave the nobles only one answer. From their perspective, they had to replace a broken toy with a newly bought one. The fact that the lightly injured soldiers were placed on sickbeds in another tent made their intent very clear.

They're just going to leave them here without bothering to treat them all.

In the end, it was a question of cost-effectiveness. So long as one didn't consider that they were dealing with their fellow man, it could seem like a rational choice. But this kind of coldhearted, ruthless "rational" thinking manifested hell on earth.

The injured had to lie without a single scrap of clean cloth over their wounds. Their wounds went unwashed in the name of conserving drinking water, and using medicine on them wasn't even considered. On top of that, over a dozen soldiers were stuffed into this small tent where most would die from their injuries worsening. Even the few who'd otherwise survive were bound to perish from languishing in such unsanitary conditions.

Everyone in this tent headed down a one-way path to death. The only question was whether their misery would end sooner or later, and everyone lying in this tent knew that.

A living hell.

There could be no better descriptor for it—when the reaper finally came to claim their souls, they could only anguish in agony.

Trying to defeat that fort in a frontal assault is just suicide. Are the higher-ups leading our army foolish enough not to see that? No, that can't be true. They brought Helena Steiner to lead us...

Thankfully, the royal guards hadn't fought on the front lines yet. Since the nobles wanted to distinguish themselves in this war, the high command authorized them to lead the charge. But as far as Adam could see, that was all just pretense.

They probably didn't stop the nobles from acting this foolishly on purpose...to weaken their power.

The answer was so simple even a child could come up with it, and the moment he reached that conclusion, Adam's expression contorted with hatred. He understood why the high command did this, but weakening the military might of the nobles meant sacrificing the lives of the conscripted commoners.

Does the high command really understand what this sight means? This question filled Adam's heart with doubt.

If the high command truly understood what it meant and knowingly sacrificed these lives, then they were inhumane monsters. And if they didn't recognize the true meaning of their actions, then they were bloody fools. Whichever it was, they were unfit to lead others.

Lupis Rhoadserians... In the end, she's nothing but a ruler who spouts lip service.

When the civil war ended, Adam truly believed she would work to improve this country. Meltina Lecter's assurances of a queen-led regime were what he put his faith in, but here was the outcome of their actions. For all their claims of reform, they refused to shed any blood for their cause.

The ones who bleed in their place are the commoners. As that thought crossed Adam's mind, a group of men carrying a large stockpot approached the tent. The man leading the group set food in the end, then instantly grimaced in disgust, turned around, and cried out like he was vomiting.

"Ugh... This stench is unbearable! Hurry up and do your work, would you?!"

He was likely the head of rationing. Upon noticing Adam standing near the tent's entrance, his expression turned surprised.

"Oh, pardon me, sir," he said respectfully, realizing from Adam's equipment that he was a knight. He was soft-spoken, and his smile was meek. "Do you have business here?"

Adam just shook his head and said, "I am Adam Fuhrer of the royal guard. Don't mind me, and go about your work."

The man regarded Adam with a questioning gaze briefly but then looked away.

"Very well. We'll try to finish up quickly to not get in your way," he said, signaling his subordinates with his eyes. They apparently chose not to get further involved with Adam.

Not that I can blame them.

No one wanted to linger in this foul tent any longer than they had to.

“Whoa, the smell’s actually gotten worse today... Dammit, why did I have to pull the short straw today, of all days?!” one of the men said.

Apparently, he was assigned to this tent because he lost some kind of bet. He didn’t want to come anywhere near this tent full of injured soldiers, but luck didn’t favor him.

“Shut up. You lost, and that’s that,” another man retorted. “Stop complaining and get back to work. The longer we stay here, the more likely I’ll lose my lunch.”

Still, everyone here felt the same way, and they all grumbled in their own small ways.

“What’s the top brass thinking?”

“Seriously, how long will they keep us running headfirst into that fort?”

For all their complaining and apparent resentment, they didn’t flee from the tent. They could be penalized for slacking off, after all.

And in this world, the lives of commoners come cheap.

They’d be lucky to get away with just whippings or forced labor, unless whoever judged them was extremely cruel, as they could get sentenced to death. Even if they couldn’t flee their jobs so readily, they didn’t need to keep quiet and tolerate this mistreatment. Their nausea was beyond their control, and their sheer nerve wasn’t enough to fight it.

As a result, the frustration of being caught between this situation and their orders was evident on the men’s faces. They knew no amount of complaining or cursing their higher-ups would resolve this. Yet they had no choice but to finish this task quickly and leave this cursed tent.

“Let’s get this over with!” ordered one of the men, clearly fed up. “I can’t deal with these half-dead people for much longer, and we’re running out of daylight here.”

The others nodded wordlessly and recovered the containers placed near each of the injured soldiers. Despite not granting them any treatment, they kept bringing their daily food rations into the tent.

But even if the injured receive food, they cannot eat without assistance...

The stockpot was full of soup, likely prepared to give the sick and injured something easy to digest. But unless one could lift a spoon and put it in their mouths—which these soldiers weren’t in the condition to do—it was nothing but an empty gesture. No nurses were present to help feed them either.

Indeed, most of the bowls retrieved from the tent were untouched since yesterday. But they kept giving them their rations to maintain the appearance of not completely abandoning these men.



Or maybe they're just doing it out of guilt.

Just then, one of the men collecting the bowls openly complained, "Hey, they didn't touch their food again! Our rations are already getting smaller. What's the top brass thinking, wasting perfectly good food on people who won't eat it?"

He was eyeing the bowl in his hand like a starving animal, suggesting they eat the leftover food. The leader of the group, however, scolded him for it.

"Don't say that. These guys aren't in this state because they want to be. No matter how hungry you are, you shouldn't eat leftovers. In the best case, it'll spoil your stomach; at worst, it'll kill you."

The man looked wistfully at the food bowl in his hand and nodded with a reluctant expression. Eating food that had been left out in this unsanitary tent for half a day could get him sick.

Yes, that's right... The food supply is getting affected too. Just like he said it would.

Adam continued listening to the men's exchange while exiting the tent. Having gained the information he needed, he left because he didn't want to stay in this disgusting tent a second longer.

That night, Adam slipped away from the royal guard's camp, walking to the encampment of a noble who was part of the northern subjugation army. After showing an emblem he'd been given to help identify him, a sentry led the way.

So many tents...

This noble led a substantial force in the northern subjugation army, which meant his camp wasn't much different in scale than Queen Lupis's own. Most of the tents had banners adorned with the emblem of a wolf decorated by roses.

The symbol of a rose held a special meaning in the Rhoadserian kingdom, as it represented the Rhoadserian royal house. Seeing that the owner of these tents could use roses in their banner design implied they were one of the few most distinguished houses in the country.

Perhaps due to this, the soldiers guarding this encampment had gear that was not too inferior to the weapons and armor used by the Royal Guard and the Monarch's Guard.

It wasn't just the gear that was better; the soldiers wearing it were likewise well trained. Putting aside whether they had mastered martial thaumaturgy and were worthy of being called knights, they professionally presented themselves. At the very least, they were nothing like the amateurish and poorly equipped conscripts making up most of the northern subjugation army.

Even after being demoted to viscount and stripped of his original domain in Heraklion, he still boasts this much influence and power. Most

impressive.

As a member of the royal guard—who, by extension, owed loyalty to the royal family—Adam should have seen a noble with this much political power as an enemy and a threat. Nobles were a beneficial tool for a monarch even if the possibility of them usurping the throne made them a latent threat. Yet Adam felt no enmity or danger; instead, he felt confident that he had made the right choice.

“Over here,” the sentry told Adam.

“Hm, thank you,” Adam responded.

They stopped in front of one tent in the center of the camp that was larger and fancier than the rest. The sentry exchanged a few words with the guards standing at the entrance, to which one of them nodded and entered the tent.

I did say it was an urgent report, so I'm sure they'll let me see him. Who's to say what'll happen? At worst, they might make me wait for a while.

Such concerns crossed Adam's mind since he had to sneak out of his camp in the dead of night to avoid his fellow knights when coming here. Most people would usually be sleeping at this time, and Adam hadn't sent a message in advance that he'd be arriving to make a report. So, he basically showed up without an appointment.

A foolish noble who would be overly occupied with appearances could become disgruntled and have him return to camp despite the time and effort it took him to come here. However, Adam's concerns were unfounded because it took the guard half a minute to exit the tent and whisper something into the sentry's ear.

“Please, come in. The lord awaits.”

With this, the guards standing at the entrance stepped aside to clear the way, to which Adam nodded pleasantly and entered the tent. His eyes then fixed on a figure seated by a desk engaged in writing something, working even this late at night. Adam swiftly got on one knee and bowed his head to the master of this tent.

“My apologies for coming at this late hour of the night, my lord,” said Adam as a vassal would to his master or king.

Normally, a royal guard like Adam would never kneel or bow his head to anyone but the queen. But he felt no qualms about doing this, seeing that he had reduced Queen Lupis to his ruler in name only. He did maintain the required courtesy around her during ceremonies in the palace and didn't make his discontent with her outwardly visible.

But that was only on the surface. Deep down, Adam no longer saw Lupis as his sovereign. What's more, the master of this tent once boasted as much strength and authority as Queen Lupis and, unlike her, gave Adam many blessings and benefits.

It's clear who is more worthy of my respect.

The master of this tent and the man Adam sought an audience with was Viscount Furio Gelhart—formerly a duke. As leader of the nobles' faction, he had governed their society in Rhoadseria for years. He was a monster of a man who once had enough power that even the king couldn't oppose him. During the last civil war, he backed Princess Radine's claim to the throne, hoping to steal the title of queen for her.

This man is that powerful.

Viscount Gelhart had indeed lost the civil war, and his authority had been on the decline. By and large, he was the ringleader of a rebellion. He avoided being sentenced to death by pinning most of the blame on General Albrecht and returning Mikhail Vanash from captivity. That said, he lost the grand majority of the domain he spent years building up and had to pay a great sum in reparations.

Being demoted from duke to viscount was an especially fatal blow. It resulted in many nobles who had served him during his heyday distancing themselves from him.

But even after all that, he's still one of the strongest and most influential people in the kingdom.

Based on the rumors Adam had heard, Furio Gelhart was working diligently day and night—all to remove the shameful descriptor "former duke" from his title. His active cooperation in the northern subjugation was an attempt to show Queen Lupis his usefulness.

It's possible he's already reclaimed most of his influence. Adam thought back to the camp he saw outside this tent, silently waiting for the viscount to respond. He prayed that this powerful man wouldn't find fault with him for this sudden, unannounced visit. At that moment, Viscount Gelhart put his pen down and looked up at him.

"Raise your head. We can't very well speak like this, can we?" Gelhart said with a smile as he rose from his seat.

He motioned Adam to sit on a sofa reserved for visitors, and both sat across each other. The viscount regarded the knight with the same courtesy as one would a guest.

"Greatly appreciated, my lord," Adam thanked him, slightly taken aback by the unexpected generosity the man showed him.

Given the class difference between the two men, talking face-to-face while seated on a sofa might have been disrespectful. Viscount Gelhart, though, shook his head; he was ready to do anything to restore his former rights. Listening to the low-ranking knight of the royal guard, Adam, was part of that. So, Gelhart regarded him with a welcoming smile.

"Your name was Adam Fuhrer, yes? No need to stand on ceremony. We might be far from the front lines, but this is still a battlefield. I assume you've come to report on the task I've given you.

Then there's no need to feel reserved."

Viscount Gelhart took out a leather sack and placed it in front of Adam.

"Let's hear your report, then."

Adam nodded briefly and parted his lips.

One hour later, Adam finished his report and left Viscount Gelhart alone in his tent. Gelhart sat on the sofa with a cup of amber-colored liquor in his glass and sipped on it, lost in thought. Right now, he stood at the greatest crossroads of his life. The decision he was about to make here would affect the future of his authority and likely influence the conclusion of the comedy that was the subjugation of the north.

In a sense, one could call him the final weight that would tip the scales in favor of the subjugation of the north. Whichever side he aligned himself with, the scales would tip toward them.

My choice will decide the fate of that young lad as well as that unpleasant queen and her insufferable servant...

He spoke of Ryoma Mikoshiba, Queen Lupis, and Meltina Lecter. To Viscount Gelhart, this trio of people were his hated enemies who dashed his hopes of ruling over Rhoadseria. He had lost the previous civil war and had to shamefully pledge allegiance to Queen Lupis, whom he deemed a foolish idealist. And the one at fault for that was undoubtedly Ryoma Mikoshiba.

What's more, he had a great grudge against the queen herself. She had taken away his domain in Heraklion, one of Rhoadseria's richest agricultural lands, and demanded he pay sizable reparations. He had every reason to hate her to the bone as her actions were all for the sake of weakening his power and influence. The fact that Heraklion, the domain his family had devoted great effort and funds to developing since the country's founding, was taken from him was the most painful outcome of all.

But the most disgusting and hateful of all was Meltina Lecter. She was subordinate to the foolishly idealistic Queen Lupis and was the one who truly tried to make that incompetent woman the kingdom's ruler. To do that, she applied great pressure on the nobles' faction at every turn.

Meltina had ordered the special taxation to revitalize the kingdom's economy after it had been ravaged by the civil war, relegating those funds to the military under the pretense of maintaining appearances. However, she did not truly care about that one bit. Her scheming also forced many nobles to distance themselves from their class faction.

Many unfavorable events had transpired under Queen Lupis's regime—like the dispatching of reinforcements to the Kingdom of

Xarooda and the civil unrest and destabilization caused by the revolt in the rural areas. Had it not been for Meltina and her poor handling of said situations, the nobles' faction would have disappeared from Rhoadseria long ago.

How ironically amusing.

Viscount Gelhart laughed out loud, after which he took a sip from his glass. Until now, he had presented himself as an ally to Queen Lupis with a submissive attitude. Even Meltina acknowledged his supportive nature despite her negative feelings toward him.

Of course, that attitude didn't reflect his true feelings; he had made a secret deal with Ryoma Mikoshiba that he couldn't afford to have discovered. With the covert nature of the pact, he risked it being an empty promise. If one side were to decide not to live up to their end of the bargain, the other side would be powerless to object. And as the one who proposed the deal, Viscount Gelhart knew this very well.

But that night, I saw what Ryoma Mikoshiba was truly capable of.

At the evening party Ryoma hosted, Viscount Gelhart saw wealth and prosperity greater than anything he was capable of at the height of his power or what even royalty could provide. The event occurred at Count Salzberg's estate on the outskirts of Epirus shortly before the massacre in the House of Lords.

Viscount Gelhart obviously couldn't attend a party that Baron Mikoshiba was hosting because of his position within the court. But just looking at the party from a separate room allowed him to see the vast financial wealth the Mikoshiba barony boasted.

The main dishes used such fresh seafood, and all those wines were brought in from the central continent. Even the capital would require more than just money to prepare such a feast.

These displays were why Viscount Gelhart remained in contact with Baron Mikoshiba behind the scenes despite openly supporting Queen Lupis in the northern subjugation. He carefully watched the ongoing conflict, seeking to discern who held the advantage before selling his services to the highest bidder.

The question is, who do I choose to throw in my lot with?

Since the northern subjugation began, Viscount Gelhart had gathered information through bribery, extortion, persuasion, and other means. He mobilized all the resources and skills he had fostered for years as the leader of the nobles' faction to learn about Queen Lupis and Baron Mikoshiba. And Adam had delivered the last bit of information he needed to make his final decision.

The report Adam gave him matched his expectations... No, it actually exceeded them to an extent.

Adam Fuhrer. He's proven quite useful despite being a mere upstart

commoner knight. If nothing else, his choice to side with me was commendable.

Thinking back to Adam's face, Viscount Gelhart smiled in scorn and disdain, which contrasted with the friendly way he had greeted him just moments ago. It was the same cold arrogance typical of nobles that Adam expected before speaking to him. If he were to see Viscount Gelhart now, he would have reconsidered turning his back on Queen Lupis, choosing to retain a businesslike relationship with her.

And Viscount Gelhart knew it. People don't change at their core that easily, and just as Adam initially suspected, the viscount was an arrogant, overbearing man at heart. Knowing full well what kind of person he was, Viscount Gelhart could hide his true nature when the need called for it.

If asked for his honest opinion, he would have liked to level a complaint or two at Adam for coming unannounced in the middle of the night. But doing so would yield him no profit, save for maybe easing his displeasure. And this was why Viscount Gelhart put on his mask of amicability.

A man's face surfaced in the viscount's mind—Kael Iruna. He was once a skilled swordsman who was Mikhail Vanash's equal and rival, a man brimming with promise and ambition. In the end, that man betrayed Viscount Gelhart and joined General Albrecht's side instead.

I was a fool back then. Just remembering that man's name made my blood boil.

When Ryoma Mikoshiba led his armies to attack Heraklion during the civil war, Kael intercepted him at the banks of the River Thebes. And there, he suffered a crushing defeat that also wiped out the private knight order Viscount Gelhart had invested plenty of funds into training and equipping.

Even Viscount Gelhart knew luck had played a major factor in the war, but he couldn't overlook those losses. So, he hurled insults and abuse at Kael for his failings. Still, this was a grave mistake that could have cost Kael his life. Letting him get away with nothing but a scolding and a slap on the wrist could seem like very magnanimous treatment. At least, this was how Viscount Gelhart saw it at the time.

But looking back at it now, it wasn't kindness. All I did was vent my frustrations on him.

Deep down, he hoped that a day would come when he would cast Kael aside and expected the knight to thank him for his decision. If he wanted to scold him for his defeat, he'd have been better off having Kael take responsibility for it by killing him right there and then. Additionally, Viscount Gelhart wouldn't have reprimanded Kael so harshly to satisfy his anger if kindness were what truly drove him.

Execute him or show him pity. Which was the better choice? It was hard to tell, but if Gelhart had settled on one option, there wouldn't have been such far-reaching consequences. But he chose a half measure, trying to pick both, making Kael feel like his dignity had been wounded. That blemish to his ego made him turn his back on the viscount and was fundamental in him switching to General Albrecht's side.

It only makes sense that he would betray me. I was too overbearing toward others for no reason, which created enemies I could have avoided.

In the end, Viscount Gelhart hadn't kept his emotions in check and had realized this was his greatest flaw and the source of his problems. It was truly a foolish blunder to have made.

And that woman is about to make the same mistake.

Since he'd once made this error, Viscount Gelhart could tell that Meltina Lecter was about to do the same. He certainly hated Lupis Rhoadserians because she was aware of the problem and was powerless to do anything to change it. Both women had a critical misunderstanding of the qualities necessary to rule over a country and lead its people.

But that man does see it. Despite this vast numerical disadvantage, he chose to take the northern subjugation army head-on.

On the surface, it seemed clear that Ryoma's strategy was to sever the northern subjugation supply line. He drove the citizens of Epirus and the surrounding northern Rhoadserian villages from their homes, forcing them to come to the northern subjugation for help. And that tactic proved effective.

It stood to reason that sheltering the refugees meant the soldiers' rations would temporarily shrink, as discovered in Viscount Gelhart's investigations. With the worthy cause of helping their unfortunate countrymen being the stated reason, the soldiers couldn't verbally object. The issue was that the rations given to the nobles commanding the military units remained unchanged.

It's only natural the soldiers would become disgruntled from seeing that.

With the siege of Fort Tilt being at a stalemate, the soldiers' morale was plummeting. But for the time being, it only amounted to them silently complaining. The problem was that, if left unchecked, their discontent would escalate further.

Of course, those women realize that Mikoshiba's aim here is to defeat the army using starvation tactics. That's why they sent Mikhail back to the capital, even if it's a painfully predictable countermeasure. Mikoshiba isn't going to sit idly by and let them get away with that... He must have some plan.

Viscount Gelhart wasn't privy to Ryoma's plans, nor did he have the tactical mind to predict them. He may have somehow inferred the boy's intentions, but held no definitive proof. Even so, as an influential aristocrat who spent many years in politics, his keen instincts warned him of a ploy.

How vexing..

The thought that he was inferior to a lowly commoner made his blood boil. During the civil war, Ryoma completely swept the rug from under Viscount Gelhart's feet, and that taught him the painful lesson that he was no match for that upstart boy.

But that was fine. All that mattered now was that he had learned from that lesson and used it to secure his own profits.

"Which makes it clear who I should side with," Viscount Gelhart whispered, picking up the liquor bottle on his table.

After refilling his empty glass, he held it to eye level and sipped on the drink. He pulled a key dangling from his chest to open the side table's drawer. Then, the viscount took a letter from inside it and smirked, believing this was the trump card that would promise him the restoration of his rights and power.

Chapter 1: The Conqueror's Kindness

"We're out here in the middle of a bloody war here, but for all the sun is concerned, puny humans killing each other is an inconsequential trifle..." Such words slipped effortlessly from Ryoma's lips.

Rays of warm sunlight flowed into the room, and outside his window spanned a clear, blue sky where white clouds drifted along. Looking at it gave one the impression they could soar wherever they pleased.

"What a fine day... Lying back in the garden with a book on a day like this while having some booze and a nice meal to snack on would probably be the best thing ever. Maybe I should ask Kikuna to fix me something to eat later... Nah, that would probably be inappropriate."

Such thoughts filled Ryoma's heart right now as even this conqueror, who many regarded as a hero, was a normal Japanese youth at heart. Now and then, he wanted to take a breather, especially when the weather was fine. Reading under the shade of a tree in the courtyard felt like the finest luxury. Sara and Laura would surely join him and offer him their laps as pillows.

But if the head of the Mikoshiba barony spent the afternoon loitering in his fortress's courtyard reading books, it would reflect poorly on his reputation.

At least not while I'm fighting Queen Lupis and her northern subjugation army...

Ryoma was currently behind the third layer of Fort Tilt's wall; looking out the window, he couldn't see the battlefield directly. Fort Tilt was built with three layers of fortifications, and the northern subjugation army was still attacking the first layer.

As governor of the Wortenia Peninsula, Ryoma had to remain in the depths of this fort to command the war despite not directly overseeing the fighting. Even so, many soldiers continued dying on the front lines that day. The scheduled reports Lione, the commander charged with defending the front lines, sent him made the brutality of the fighting abundantly clear.

While the casualties on Ryoma's side weren't zero, they were still light compared with the northern subjugation army.

Thankfully, the losses on our side are slim. But given all the preparations I made to make that happen, that's only natural.

After all, both flanks of the fortress were built along precipitous cliffs, making the long mountain road leading to the gates gradually narrow as one headed to the fort. No matter how large the enemy army was, these conditions limited how many soldiers could approach at any given moment. And the brutal outcome of that was the northern subjugation army's current predicament.

The Mikoshiba barony army had minimized its losses by holing up in the fortress and relying on long-distance attacks, resulting in the northern subjugation army having its forces one-sidedly diminished every day. One could very well say the situation was clearly favoring Ryoma.

And so, the young conqueror who was the lord of this fort was brimming with confidence and ambition. His was the face of a man who was confident in the justice and validity of his actions.

But all of this is thanks to the defensive installations we set up when building the fort and the commanders on the field being able to put them to good use.

Terrain played a great part in securing a defensive position, and Ryoma deserved the credit for devising the idea of building the fort around these natural defenses. But he knew that his victories so far didn't come down to just that.

I did read war manuals to prepare for this, so I had theoretical knowledge on conducting a defensive battle, but that's just textbook learning. Referring to Lione and Boltz for input on the fort's final layout was the right idea. The actual combat experience mercenaries have is ultimately indispensable, and commanders as seasoned as them are hard to come by.

The most important factors were employing an appropriate strategy and maintaining a firm chain of command. To enable this, Ryoma needed skilled vassals on his side. Finding those who adjusted to the constantly changing nature of the battlefield took talent and was difficult on its own.

All that was why Lione's unit, the Crimson Lions, formed the backbone of the Mikoshiba barony's army. As mercenaries with a wealth of combat experience and a firm chain of command, they comprised a highly tenacious and adaptable unit.

Yet they lacked the stormlike strength and penetrating force Robert's cavalry unit had. The might of that unit originated from a combination of terrifying talent and a wealth of experience on the most menacing of battlefields.

Those two are just on another level, after all.

Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria were two monstrous men, the kind that mere combat experience and average talent couldn't produce. They were very much the two strongest spears at Ryoma's

disposal. For that reason, many saw the cavalry units they led as the strongest in the Mikoshiba barony. And so, Lione's unit didn't boast the same offensive might they did.

But to compensate for that, Lione and her unit have an adaptability the cavalry can't imitate.

They were skilled at fighting on open fields and under siege; they could also function as infantry, archers, and engineers whenever needed. Whatever situation they were in, they could produce results. This adaptability was an unmatched boon in times of war, where situations changed by the minute.

What allowed the Crimson Lions this kind of multipotency was that, back when they were mercenaries for hire, Lione stationed them across different units to serve as commanders. This granted each member an abundance of live combat experience, which now turned Fort Tilt into an impregnable fort.

But even that isn't enough to explain our success so far.

Ryoma's lips curled upward into a dark sneer that scorned his enemies. Typically, this kind of emotion would be inappropriate at the height of a war. Perhaps the knowledge that his losses at the fort were minimal and this bright, clear sky made Ryoma more careless than usual. This was quite rare as he was exceedingly cautious in any situation.

But how else could he feel? Everything was going his way at the moment.



When defending a fort, the most important aspect was maintaining the soldiers' morale. One could go so far as to say it influenced the success of a siege battle more than the number of troops, the quality of their weapons, or the size of their rations. One could secure all those things, and yet low morale might still lead to one's castle falling. Even the healthiest and most skilled soldiers relied on their will to win battles.

If likened to a vehicle, even the car with the strongest, fastest engine was only a decoration without the gasoline to keep it running. Even if supplies and weapons were to run short, soldiers could hold their ground so long as they kept up their morale.

Realistically speaking, getting that close to starvation would mean the castle would fall anyway.

All the same, fighting against soldiers willing to fight to their last breath was a terrifying prospect. Morale was a factor that swung the tide of battles, which was why all famous generals took great pains to figure out how to maintain it. And this young hero, too, was well aware of its importance.

No matter how firm one's defenses are, soldiers are aware they're surrounded by the enemy at all times. This places a great strain on their mental health.

Of course, Fort Tilt was guarding the entrance to the Mikoshiba barony's domain, meaning their supply line with their main stronghold, Sirius, was still intact. In this regard, Fort Tilt wasn't like Xiang Yu of Chu when he was isolated and betrayed in the Battle of Gaixia, so the mental strain the soldiers were under wasn't as severe as it could be.

Despite that, seeing an army several times your size stationed before the fort was still a threat the soldiers guarding the area couldn't simply overlook. No matter how firm their walls may have been, the sight of bloodthirsty soldiers out to claim their lives was still demoralizing.

Unlike fighting on an open field, the soldiers on the defending side couldn't inflict casualties on their own. The option to leave the fort and go on the offensive was always on the table, but this was an unusual tactic. Fundamentally, the defending side in a siege battle only responded to attacks.

But remaining on the defensive put considerable stress on the soldiers, and the outcome went without saying. Indeed, many history books told of siege battles that ended in the defending side's defeat because its soldiers became demoralized by the prolonged campaign.

In other words, the defending side's inability to take the initiative means they need some tangible proof of their success. And the most

tangible way of showing that is through the enemy's dead bodies.

The higher the attacking enemies' corpses piled up, the more confident the defending side's soldiers became in the firmness of their fortress and the inevitability of their victory. That they would not die in this war. This was an illusion; they were convincing themselves of something they could not prove. But this illusion was what allowed the soldiers to stave off their fear of death.

To do this, Ryoma made diligent plans and strategies and prepared many defensive weapons.

Well, the northern subjugation army's losses aren't that major, so we can't be too optimistic, but... Yeah.

In terms of actual numbers, they had lost roughly ten thousand men in total casualties. That included the heavily injured who could not fight anymore; the dead only accounted for roughly one-third of that number. That is to say, a force about the same size as a noble's single knight order had been slain throughout the siege.

To any aristocrat—even a duke, the highest noble rank—this would have been a crisis with implications for their house's survival. But for the northern subjugation army, losing only ten thousand troops wouldn't decide the outcome of the war.

Needless to say, having ten thousand soldiers drop out due to injury or death was immense. Those deaths resembled the population size of a medium-scale city. But to begin with, the northern subjugation army boasted two hundred thousand troops. While Ryoma's trap in Epirus cost the army nearly thirty thousand of its troops, there were still one hundred seventy thousand troops remaining when the siege of Fort Tilt began. Another estimated ten thousand dropped out of the fighting, meaning they still boasted a sizable army of one hundred fifty thousand to one hundred sixty thousand troops.

Ryoma didn't know their exact numbers, of course, but given the scout unit's report, his estimate wasn't too off the mark. Considering the enemy hadn't lost even a tenth of their numbers since the siege began, there was no chance any northern subjugation army commanders would simply turn tail and run.

Especially given how the northern subjugation army is made up of privileged nobles who are sure they're better than everyone else. Their dignity won't allow them to admit defeat. Politically speaking, retreating at this point would be difficult.

Even if some nobles understood the current state of their army, it wouldn't amount to much. A minority grasping the situation properly wouldn't be able to influence the entire group's decision-making. It was said that bad money drives out good money, and the stubbornness of hard-liners can fizzle out much the same way as sensible words can.

But at the same time, no capable commander would be willing to continue the siege with no strategy.

Any commander worth their salt wouldn't have tried to brute force their way through this fort, though.

As the man who built this fort, Ryoma would never have been foolish enough to try to force his way through it. Even if he didn't know the general structure of this fort, he wouldn't have made that choice. A cursory glance at the place made it clear just how firm of a fortress it was.

If one assumed Ryoma had no choice but to go on a brute-force offensive, he'd have at least made some preparations to draw out the fort's garrison and defeat them in open combat.

Conquering a fortress that relies on its terrain requires that much ingenuity.

The scariest part of the siege battle was that even by resorting to clever schemes, there was no guarantee you would win. This was why strategy manuals across all ages recommended using battering rams, siege towers, and burrowing sappers, or cutting off a fort's water supply.

But tactics on that level would be something a skilled woman like Helena, Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, would have come up with before the battle started.

That knowledge didn't come from her reading strategy manuals but simply because of experience. She was a seasoned warrior who had survived many battles, which had earned her that lofty title.

Since they're still going on a brute-force assault, I'm guessing Helena wasn't able to keep the nobles in check.

As a general and a national hero of Rhoadseria, Helena was the northern subjugation army's supreme commander on paper but lacked the authority one would expect from her station. This was because Queen Lupis, who nominated her for this role, didn't trust Helena, so naturally, she tried to limit her commanding rights.

Still, Helena was unable to control the nobles in this situation because of their greed and desire for military glory. At face value, it would seem the nobles refused to obey Helena's instructions and went on this overeager attack.

But for a moment, another possibility crossed Ryoma's mind. *What if Meltina or someone in their camp plotted to turn the tables and use this as a chance to flush out the fools who stood in their way?*

Why not push allies they couldn't control or restrain into the enemy army, using them to weaken the opponent? It was a reasonable plan. If nothing else, it was better than wasting supplies on attacks that didn't even amount to starvation tactics. The more he thought about it, the more Meltina's plan became clear to Ryoma.

I see... Honestly, not a bad plan.

But the sneer of pity and scorn lingered on Ryoma's lips. The nobles were a group that put importance on dignity and blood ties, which was as true in his world as it was in this one. It justified their position as leaders and inevitably brought about a sense of entitlement. And even among the nobles of this world, the Rhoadserian nobles were especially privileged.

After all, they had gathered an army of two hundred thousand. It wouldn't be unusual for them to assume they could easily crush an upstart baron. Or rather, Ryoma guided them to think so, and Meltina took advantage of this.

They intend to restore the royal family to its former strength so they can rule the kingdom, and most of the nobles are holding that back. The incident at the House of Lords whittled their numbers down, but there's still plenty of parasites in this kingdom. In that regard, this isn't a bad decision at all.

If Ryoma wanted to seriously reorganize Rhoadseria, he would first cut down the country's noble houses, which were said to number anywhere from hundreds to over a thousand. In which case, one could say Meltina acted the same way Ryoma would have. This outlook came across as startling growth and contrasted with the candid, impulsive way she used to act and her sense of justice.

But Ryoma would have never chosen to dispose of the nobles like this. He wouldn't have eliminated the nobles without setting up meticulous groundwork—or, to be more exact, would not have been able to do it otherwise.

The big point here is, does Meltina understand the problems that come from deciding to eliminate the nobility?

Her decision to rid the country of the nobles was fine, but doing so had consequences, and those required countermeasures to offset them. Ryoma doubted that Meltina had considered that.

I wouldn't keep my hopes up about that.

Based on Meltina's attitude during the House of Lords incident, Ryoma surmised she saw the nobles as an obstacle to Queen Lupis's regime. As her closest aide, it only made sense that she would feel this way. But this didn't mean her judgment was correct in this case.

“Seriously... I know she's our enemy now, but I feel bad for Helena. Having to command those idiots and attack Fort Tilt...”

Which idiots did he mean, Meltina or the arrogant nobles she was trying to get rid of? Whichever, they were quite a weak point from Ryoma's perspective. The essence of war was to take advantage of your enemy's weakness and inhibit their strength, so he had no reason to think twice about pressing on that weak point.

When humans experience something painful, they, like all living

things, learn how not to undergo that pain again. Meltina sought to expel the nobles because of the painful experiences the nobles put her through during the civil war. The fact she learned from her mistake would usually be worthy of praise. If nothing else, it was leagues of progress from how she was just a few years ago when she'd fixated on chivalry while Ryoma had been more broad-minded.

But that didn't mean he had to praise her without some qualms. *She's matured; I'll grant her that. But for some things, only realizing you did wrong after you failed is too little, too late.*

Everyone fails at one point or another, and Ryoma himself had made plenty of errors in the past. So, he wouldn't claim that learning your lesson after making a mistake was always pointless. But in war, the situation changes by the minute. The first move had long-lasting repercussions, and nothing happened as it did before. Some situations may be similar, but it was only on the surface. And so, countermeasures must suit each unique situation and be fine-tuned to match the particularities of that specific war.

Because of such unpredictability, assuming that each failure is a learning experience is dangerous.

Either way, our only option is to see what the enemy does.

No matter how arrogant and foolish most of the Rhoadserian nobles were, they would eventually realize this approach wasn't working. Perhaps this was why the northern subjugation army, which relied on its superior numbers, hadn't attempted to attack the gates over the last two days. While Ryoma couldn't be complacent, he didn't need to be terribly wary of them either.

He was, in a manner of speaking, in the eye of the typhoon right now, which gave him the leisure of time to visit his recuperating vassals' rooms.

We're in a lull until the enemy comes up with their next plan. But it won't be long until they realize the dire straits they are really in. As he thought about this, he had already laid the groundwork for when that would happen. He then headed toward a door but stood still. *Now this is making me pretty nervous.*

Unlike how he brimmed with confidence earlier, Ryoma now looked like a boy his age. He must have been quite nervous. All he had to do was knock on the door and announce his visit, but he couldn't quite come up with the words. Perhaps aware of how he must have looked, he scanned the area swiftly.

Although he was visiting one of his retainers, this was still a young woman. So it only made sense that he, as a man, would mind his appearance. As a ruler amid a war, he also couldn't afford to have rumors going around that he was infatuated with a woman.

Of course, Ryoma was probably overthinking things and being

extremely self-conscious. But the way a person's emotions worked made it so that even if he knew that, he couldn't help but feel this way. In this sense, Ryoma was still an inexperienced boy.

All of this was just from Ryoma's perspective. He had no way of knowing this, but his retainers in the Mikoshiba barony honestly wanted him to hurry up, pick a wife or a concubine, and produce an heir. Perhaps not right now, in the middle of the northern subjugation war, but the question of their lord's successor weighed on his vassals' hearts.

After all, Ryoma was the first head of the Mikoshiba barony, and the Mikoshiba barony's bloodline would end if he were to die. The chances of that happening were slim but not impossible.

Even putting aside such pragmatic reasons, his concerns were still unfounded. Basically all of his female retainers—from the Malfist sisters to Lione and Simone—had some feelings for him that he couldn't write off as simple loyalty to their lord. The dark elf Dilphina would gladly offer herself up in matrimony to bridge the gap between their races if he sought to do so. Her father, Nelcius, firmly instructed her to share his bed if given the chance.

So if Ryoma were to seek a relationship with any of them, none would particularly object. The same lack of complaints applied if said relationship reached as far as an official marriage, even if it was a different situation. In fact, they would be sincerely happy to see him be so forward since it would offer a solution for the burning issue of the house's succession.

But since Ryoma was unaware of his retainers' feelings, this situation felt like an issue prone to dangerous misunderstandings. Even with all those risks, Ryoma decided to visit this room for a reason.

Now then...

Glancing at his reflection in the window's glass pane, he brushed his hair. The reflection gazing back at him was his usual mature-looking face. He was, however, dressed in a noble's formalwear with his hair thoroughly brushed down and swept back. He stood there with all the majesty of a king.

This should do.

Laura and Sara were the ones charged with his personal grooming, so it was unlikely anything was too wrong. However, he checked himself out one last time before entering the room despite normally not being concerned with his appearance.

Not that he would go around in unwashed, smelly clothes or anything like that. But he did think that as long as his clothes were clean and had no holes in them, everything was fine. He wasn't the kind to coordinate outfits based on fashion magazines, nor was he that

particular about his hairstyle.

Ignoring that his face looked several years older than he really was and his expression was overall curt, Ryoma was relatively well-kept. Girls had asked him out a few times, but Ryoma turned them down because he wasn't very interested in girls his age. Not because their appearances or age were an issue but simply because he felt they were mentally and emotionally immature.

It was for this same reason that Ryoma lacked friends from his age group. He interacted with his peers but did so at the bare minimum that was expected of him, and he didn't grow any closer to them than that. Whenever young people his age talked about fashion magazines, it just struck him as double Dutch. When asked about clothes, Ryoma was more likely to care whether they were slash-resistant or had room to conceal a weapon.

Since being summoned to this world, maintaining a minimal standard of appearance was the most he could care about. Here, most people wore whatever clothes they could, and only nobles cared about their outfits.

Due to this, Ryoma was quite surprised when the Malfist sisters reacted so adamantly when he told them he'd be visiting Sakuya's room. Thinking back to their words made Ryoma smile uncomfortably.

"You simply don't understand a woman's heart." Huh?

Bewildered by Laura's words, Ryoma was forced into a chair where she combed his hair and applied some fragrant oil to it. Meanwhile, Sara brought out an outfit similar to the one he wore at the House of Lords out of nowhere and ordered Ryoma to change into it.

Overwhelmed by the sisters' ardent attitude, the young conqueror could only submit to their demands. They gave him a pass on the get-well present he had prepared for Sakuya, but they would have gotten angrier if he hadn't arranged things ahead of time.

I didn't think those two would get so upset with me.

They had been his closest confidants since being summoned into this world, and he'd been through thick and thin with them. So having those two find fault with him weighed heavily on Ryoma's heart. He couldn't help but feel like their reactions were excessive.

But he was also aware that, as head of the Mikoshiba barony, going around in his usual black shirt or armor wouldn't be appropriate. Nobles or royalty didn't maintain fancy attire solely out of a desire to show off. They did so because they understood that their presence and appearance were symbolic to an extent. And no one would want to have to work under a banner with an unsightly, shabby symbol.

And I guess these threads are what I should be wearing now.

Ryoma wasn't a Japanese high schooler anymore. He was a noble and a conqueror, his hands stained with the blood of tens of thousands. His words carried authority over an army just as grand, so he had to dress the part.

With that thought in mind, Ryoma took a deep breath to steel himself and knocked on the door—right now, he had a task to attend to.

That day, an unexpected visitor arrived in Sakuya Igasaki's room. Seeing him made her regard him with an expression of surprise and shame. If she could bury herself in this moment, she would do so.

I didn't think the lord would come here. With that thought in mind, Sakuya, clad in her sleeping gown, pulled up the blanket to cover herself. It was too little too late, though. *I'd have much preferred it if someone had informed me he was coming. Then, I could have prepared myself properly...*

Sakuya lay in bed, recovering from the arrow wound she had received the other day. When she heard the knock on the door, she assumed it was a maid who had come to tend to her.

She carelessly said, "Come in." But this was how she had landed in such a conundrum. *And I can't ask him to leave now.*

This was her lord, after all. If he hadn't entered the room yet, she might have still been able to refuse. Now that she had let him inside, there was no taking back what she said. She couldn't tell her respected master that she'd let him in by mistake and wanted him to leave.

Of course, Ryoma being here was an unusual development, to say the least. He was the lord of the Mikoshiba barony, and a man as busy and influential as him wouldn't often pay courtesy calls to his retainers' rooms. If nothing else, this wasn't what nobles typically did in this world.

So when Ryoma opened the door and entered, it took Sakuya a few seconds to fully process what happened as the event drained all the color from her face. Regardless, she was currently under medical care in her room. She was only in a sleeping gown to rest comfortably, even if it resembled modern pajamas.

Normally, this wouldn't be particularly revealing or improper, though Sakuya had to curse her carelessness as a young woman. She gripped the covers, her cheeks flushing and her emotions clear on her face.

Ryoma, however, was oblivious to her feelings. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he actively pretended not to notice them.

"Well, think of this as a get-well present," Ryoma said with a smile as he handed her a box of sweets. "I asked Kikuna to make these

macarons, so they're guaranteed to be good." He looked like he was trying to maintain his composure at a glance. On closer inspection, he was clearly averting his gaze from Sakuya, which made it all meaningless.

"Thank you," said Sakuya with an awkward smile as she sat up. She accepted the box and placed it on a stand beside the bed. *Ordering his chef to make sweets, especially for me?*

While Kikuna Samejima wasn't a pâtissier, this was still the handiwork of a French chef, so it was close to the authentic French flavor. A sweet of this quality would even be hard to come by in modern Japan. In this world where sugar was terribly scarce, so very few people, if at all, had the privilege of tasting something like this.



But Ryoma's sensibilities as a Japanese person made him uncomfortable visiting a hospitalized person without a get-well present. So he chose something that would last a few days, even though he'd just handed her pure gold.

The fact that it was him giving her this present only made it all the more embarrassing. Even a coldhearted ninja like Sakuya couldn't keep her cool, and a heavy silence hung over the room.

Goodness, what do I do? I need to say something...

That emotion alone gripped Sakuya's heart, and unable to come up with an answer, she remained silent. She could have said something along the lines of, "These look delicious. Shall we have some together?" While she could have used this to jump-start a conversation, she couldn't bring herself to utter the words.

It was all but decided that she would eventually become one of the elders guiding the Igasaki clan, and her subordinates greatly trusted and respected her. But in truth, Sakuya was still a young woman. Her grandfather Gennou had only taught her assassination and unconventional warfare skills, including the technical skills of a superior ninja who commanded lower-ranking ninjas.

While she was a skilled ninja, she was a complete amateur in the kind of lovemaking and seduction skills that female ninjas—kunoichi—have been known to employ to gather information. She had the basic knowledge of these arts but no practical experience, which was to be expected.

The Igasaki clan comprised ninjas that excelled at gathering intelligence, and some among them had the skills and knowledge necessary to masquerade as prostitutes and infiltrate brothels and taverns. As a future elder, Sakuya was spared from such dirty work, which was why she had no experience with men.

If her duties called for it, Sakuya wouldn't hesitate to debase herself like that. The principles that Gennou instilled in her would spur her to sacrifice her happiness as a woman in favor of the clan's success and survival. Gennou, too, was willing to sacrifice Sakuya for the greater good if needed. But only if necessary.

One could say that these emotions were contradictory, but he didn't mind. As an elder of the Igasaki clan, he was torn between his duties and his affection for his granddaughter. But the same could be said of Sakuya. This contradiction only happened when the strongest sword and the sturdiest shield clashed. So long as there was no need for them to clash, the two could coexist.

Had Gennou been in the room, he'd have grown angry at this awkward silence and shouted at them to get on with it. He'd also have regretted that Sakuya didn't have more experience as a kunoichi.

If Grandfather were here, he'd say I'm lacking in resolve. Perhaps he'd send me back to train under Lady Oume and Lady Osae.

The two old ladies Sakuya thought about were experienced ninjas who managed the training and deployment of the kunoichi. Since they were now elders, they didn't take to the field personally. But both were known to be quite beautiful in their youth and skilled with bedroom skills, seduction, and coaxing information out of men.

Rumor had it that nobles and royalty were powerless before their seductive ways as they were like goddesses regarding sensual pleasures. Perhaps their training would have made Sakuya more skilled in this field.

And, honestly... Maybe that wouldn't be too bad. Sakuya attempted to look away from this situation and cracked a self-deprecating smile. Maybe training under them again would teach her how to conduct herself in a situation like this, but that would only help her improve in the future. It wouldn't solve her current predicament.

Looking at Sakuya, Ryoma tilted his head and asked, "Does your wound still ache?"

Sakuya noticed the bitter smile on his lips. *He looks uncharacteristically anxious.*

It almost came across as timid. But this was proof that he was concerned for her.

"No, the nostrum I was given closed the wound. It doesn't hurt anymore," replied Sakuya as she shook her head.

She wasn't lying—the arrow wound she received the other day was already gone without a trace. Such a wound couldn't possibly heal that quickly, but it wasn't fatal or terribly crippling. Not having it properly treated would have meant she could bleed to death, and it did run the risk of her getting infected with a disease like tetanus.

But for how unlikely it may have seemed, Ryoma nodded, satisfied with her answer.

"The nostrums the dark elf thaumaturgists make really are impressive..." she said.

"Yes. It may not have been a fatal wound. Still, I didn't think it would heal that quickly. It truly lives up to its name as secret medicine."

Such remedies were rare, valuable medicine that only the most skilled dark elven thaumaturgists could produce. It could even reattach severed limbs with no aftereffects, even though it only worked if used shortly after the limb was severed.

If someone who didn't have trade relations with the dark elves were to get their hands on such a remedy, it would likely sell for unimaginable prices. It would truly be priceless. But despite having been provided with such precious medicine, Sakuya's tone came

across as dark and heavy. And for how reserved he was with romance, Ryoma could read into her emotions here.

“Are you displeased that you were ordered to remain in bed and recover?”

Hearing this question made Sakuya’s hand clench for a moment. His question hit the mark perfectly, but Sakuya wasn’t foolish enough to speak to this emotion openly.

Besides...

She couldn’t deny she was displeased at being ordered to rest and recover. The northern subjugation army was stationed outside Fort Tilt, and the fighting still raged on as they spoke. And while the Mikoshiba barony, the defending side, had the advantage, the state of the war was still fluid and could change at any moment. Additionally, many of the Igasaki ninjas were out and about on Ryoma’s orders, laying the groundwork for future plans.

Amidst all that, Sakuya remained in her room to recover as ordered. Despite being injured, she’d recovered to the point of the wound not impeding her in any way. It struck her as unnatural, but at the same time, she couldn’t quite complain about getting favorable treatment.

This wasn’t the sole concern weighing on her heart, however. More than anything else, she was full of sorrow at having betrayed her master’s trust, as well as anger toward herself for her failure.

“I did not meet your expectations, milord...” she muttered in a soft, nearly inaudible voice. Somehow the words echoed loudly in the room, regardless.

“Did not meet my expectations, huh?” Ryoma said and nodded. “So that is how you feel.”

It became clear what was bothering Sakuya so much. She and her group succeeded in the large-scale razing of the citadel city of Epirus, striking a painful blow against the northern subjugation army. But when Helena gave chase, Sakuya was forced to discard the hang gliders that were one of Ryoma’s trump cards.

“I believe I told you that wasn’t an issue, though.”

Ryoma had no intention of blaming Sakuya, but she shook her head silently.

She then thought, *The lord would say with a smile that considering they could have fallen into enemy hands, that was a necessary choice, but...*

It did mean that they would have to reconsider and adjust future tactics. No one would blame Sakuya for doing what she did, not even Gennou. Everyone would have agreed that, given her predicament, Sakuya made the right choice. Even so, she didn’t feel that way and couldn’t justify her actions. Having resolved to devote herself to

ensuring her lord's conquest, this wasn't a blunder she could overlook.

Seeing Sakuya's dispirited response, Ryoma sighed and whispered, "You really are earnest to a fault, you know that?" He dropped his eyes on the sweet box sitting on the table.

He then reached out his large hand, as thick as a glove, and gently patted Sakuya on the head like he was trying to console a little girl.

"Eat something and relax a little, would you? You won't last if you don't take breaks sometimes."

Sakuya regarded her lord with baffled eyes, taken aback by his words. She echoed his words, "Earnest to a fault?"

Ryoma nodded with a smile, then rose from his chair and turned around. Waving goodbye, he left the room as if telling her to find her own answer. Sakuya could only watch him leave until he closed the door behind him, still feeling the residual heat of his large hand on her head.

The following night, Sakuya received another unexpected visitor. This visitor wasn't a surprise at all, unlike when her master entered the room. It was her grandfather, Gennou Igasaki; it was perfectly natural for one to visit a family member in their room. But this time, there was a caveat involved. Sitting by the window was a plate of colorful macarons as well as teacups full of fragrant, steaming tea.

"I see you've returned," Sakuya said, bowing her head in a perfect show of respect. "I'm glad to see you safe and sound."

Gennou nodded curtly, picked up one brown macaron from the plate, and bit into it, likely wanting to taste these sweets before getting into the topic at hand. This wasn't him having a particularly sweet tooth or being a glutton, but more that he had to confirm the taste of the sweets Ryoma brought if he were to complete the task his master gave him.

Indeed, a moderate sweetness mixed with the wonderful fragrance of fruit.

It was a flavor Gennou had never experienced in his long, storied life. After nodding once, he sipped on some tea and reached for an orange-colored macaron next.

"This one had fruit peels kneaded into it... Truly delectable," Gennou said in amazement. "But was there any reason to put so much effort into it? Its flavor goes beyond just sweetness."

Its sweetness was beyond the description of just an abundance of sugar. The treats had been made with a truly elaborate recipe, with cut-up fruit peels and crushed nuts mixed into the dough. There was a likelihood each macaron used different dough with unique flavors.

There are at least ten varieties here, and each one has a different flavor.

This was likely done to keep those eating them from tiring of the

flavor. Through this, Gennou could feel Ryoma's consideration for Sakuya as well as the intent behind this present.

"The lord was worried for you... You should be very grateful," said Gennou from the bottom of his heart.

If Ryoma were the type of ruler who cared nothing for his retainers, he would not have put so much care and investment into this gift. The same applied if he was occupied solidifying his reputation as a kind ruler. As far as Gennou could see, these sweets were the culinary equivalent of gold.

After all, even a simple gumdrop was a precious luxury in this world. But in this case, those who had made them put the utmost care into using fruit to enhance the flavor of these sweets. Things like this were terribly hard to come by on this continent, since this used fruit that even Gennou, who had explored the land to gather information on warring countries, wasn't familiar with.

These were likely imported from the southern or central continents.

This made it clear how valuable this gift was and showed how much more Ryoma cared for his retainers compared to this world's standards. But this didn't mean he treated all his retainers equally. There was bound to be a difference based on their performance, achievements, and how much he trusted them. As such, there were very few retainers Ryoma cared for this much, with the Malfist sisters being the clearest example.

If nothing else, this isn't something he'd give to any retainer. The fact he sent this to Sakuya means he trusts her a great deal.

In that regard, it was clear how much Ryoma believed in her. But while Sakuya seemed happy about what Gennou told her, she also looked downhearted. This was enough to make Gennou realize how conflicted his granddaughter's mental state was.

"Is it that hard to forgive yourself?" he asked.

Sakuya nodded wordlessly.

"I see," he said silently. "I can see why he ordered you to rest, then."

"What do you mean?" Sakuya looked up at him, her eyes full of confusion and doubt.

This was proof that she truly didn't understand why Ryoma acted the way he did. Gennou just sighed heavily.

"He wouldn't possibly come here just to visit you, would he?"

"Well..." Sakuya was at a loss about how to reply.

She wasn't sure why Ryoma would come personally to visit her room. Not to say he wasn't concerned for her, but her life wasn't at risk. The dark elven medicine healed her to the point that no scars lingered. However, they were in the middle of war, so having Sakuya stay in her room at a time like this was self-evident. But right now,

she couldn't see this obvious reason, even though she would normally realize it.

Yes, if she was in her usual state of mind...

And Ryoma realized that her state of mind wasn't currently sound. Outwardly, it only came across as a slight sense of unease, but Sakuya's emotional balance was compromised.

It won't affect anything right away, and given time, she'll calm down. So there's no cause for concern. However...

Time heals all wounds, as the old saying goes, but that was only a general statement. There were no one-size-fits-all answers when it came to the human heart. Her inability to return to her former confidence was the least of her problems. Since they were in the middle of a war, her emotional state could end up costing Sakuya her life.

That her emotional imbalance was too subtle to see was the biggest problem here. If this issue visibly impeded her performance, Sakuya would have noticed something was wrong. But the fact it was not clearly visible meant she couldn't tell there was any problem with her.

"Sakuya, you've convinced yourself you failed to complete your mission and are desperate to compensate for that blunder."

"I'm...desperate?" Sakuya asked, unconvinced, and Gennou nodded severely.

This was a truly sensitive topic, and Ryoma telling her this would have made her cower even more. If her colleagues, like Lione and the Malfist sisters, had told her this reason, she would have gotten upset and argued to the contrary.

And that's why he called me. Gennou was in Sakuya's room tonight because Ryoma ordered him to return. To do this, Gennou had to change his plans on short notice since he was commanding an operation against the northern subjugation army, where they were laying the groundwork for the eventual decisive battle. In other words, these preparations were crucial and could decide the fate of this war.

He left the management of this crucial task in the hands of his assistant Ryusai and returned to Fort Tilt because of an unexpected order from his lord. But only when he saw Sakuya's state with his own eyes did Gennou realize why Ryoma gave that order.

Seeking to complete your jobs isn't a bad thing in and of itself. But the emotion at the core of this desire is arrogance on Sakuya's side. And well, that's simply because she's performed a bit too well so far.

Sakuya Igasaki overflowed with talent as a ninja. She was more than proficient with her skills, and aside from Gennou and the other Elders, few in the clan could match her. Until now, Sakuya had

accomplished her tasks without incident and had only failed at a mission once.

During the previous civil war, their clan received a mission from Furio Gelhart, the head of the nobles' faction, to assassinate Ryoma Mikoshiba. At the time, the Igasaki clan didn't follow a master. When she failed, Gennou noticed Ryoma's skills and intervened, so Sakuya wasn't criticized for her failure.

But things have changed. Right now, we have a lord we trust and believe in.

This was the Igasaki clan's most cherished desire, which they had pursued in the five hundred years since they were summoned to this world. And indeed, Sakuya harbored absolute loyalty to her new master.

And that's an admirable trait. But...

Failing a mission given to her by her beloved liege left a chink in Sakuya's heart. From Gennou's perspective, her blunder didn't register as a failure. Yes, she'd lost the precious hang gliders and struggled with Helena Steiner's pursuit, which got Sakuya cornered and nearly cost her life. This incident even required Ryoma to rescue her. But her razing of the city of Epirus did successfully claim the lives of many of the enemy army's soldiers.

So while she didn't do a perfect job, one couldn't even say she failed to stick the landing. Everyone in the Mikoshiba barony, Ryoma included, would agree she accomplished what she set out to do and did it well despite that minor mistake.

But Sakuya alone failed to see this and had convinced herself that this had been a major failure, leading to that compulsive idea torturing her heart. Because of this, Sakuya felt driven to persevere by never failing and following her master's orders to perfect completion.

There's nothing wrong with striving for perfection, of course. But a ninja's teachings say to stow away one's heart when you pick up the sword, lest doubt dull the blade.

Those teachings applied when dealing with both foe and friend—but also yourself. One had to remain calm, coolheaded, and collected at all times. In that regard, there was a clear risk to having Sakuya handle missions in this state.

This is the case especially now when the tide of the war will swing greatly in the coming days.

Gennou's intelligence stated that the northern subjugation army was considering giving up on a frontal assault against Fort Tilt. The army had instead elected to spread out in the surrounding mountains to circle around the fort and cut off its supply route.

Such was an admirable strategy as any fortress, regardless of its strength, would eventually fall without a line of supplies. Thus,

Ryoma ordered a mixed unit of the Igasaki ninja and Dilphina's dark elf warriors to intercept these forces. The dark elves were skilled verbal thaumaturgists and adept hunters who lived off the land on this peninsula. With the Igasaki clan and its expertise in unconventional warfare, the mixed unit was expected to perform well in the steep mountains and dense woods. But the only question was: who was to lead this mixed unit?

Lady Dilphina could certainly fit the role, but...

Dilphina, who drew on the blood of the Mad Demon Nelcius, was a fearsome warrior like her father, but she wasn't a commander. Trying to force her into that role would only stifle what she did best. Since Gennou and the other elders were currently away from Fort Tilt on their lord's orders, only one person remained who could possibly lead this mixed unit.

But as she is now, it's too dangerous to entrust this crucial task to Sakuya.

Impatience had a way of making people's sense of judgment fail and lead them astray. Her desire to succeed could make her impatient, and that could eventually cost people their lives. There were no guarantees, of course, and this wasn't to say Ryoma was convinced Sakuya would act recklessly. But he decided to order Sakuya to rest for a time out of a desire to minimize all risks.

He basically gave Sakuya a grace period to refresh herself and calm her wavering heart. It was truly the type of foresight one would expect of a good ruler. But sadly, Sakuya could not grasp the kindness and consideration of this decision.

"From the looks of it, you still don't understand why he came to visit you," Gennou said, his voice full of resignation and disappointment.

Sakuya's shoulders trembled. She noticed that she didn't understand Ryoma's intentions, which made her feel small and disappointed with herself. Doubt in her own abilities was why Ryoma went to great lengths to have Gennou return.

Then what I must do is clear.

Gennou grimly parted his lips to fulfill the role his lord had entrusted him with. He believed all the while that doing so would give his wavering granddaughter the ray of light she needed.

Chapter 2: The Southern Battlefield

Black smoke rose, blowing crimson sparks into the night air.

“Get water! We need to put out the fire!”

“No good, it’s spreading too fast!”

The screaming of women and the voices of men trying to calm them down echoed all over. But a group on horseback rode about without regard for their voices, the rumbling of their hooves resounding as they tossed bottle-shaped ceramic vases at every building they happened upon.

The sound of breaking ceramic reverberated throughout the night. The ceramic vases were full of oil and were corked with burning rags. Each time the riders threw them against the walls, the wooden building burst into flames, and the intensity of the fire grew.

“It’s burning! The town of Thelmis is burning!”

It was a scream of agony and grief seeing the hometown where they were born and raised burn to ashes. But it was also full of fear and alarm at having been forced into this unexpected situation.

“It’s no good! We have to give up and run!”

Anger, sorrow, grief, and resignation were among the countless emotions that mingled with the dancing flames. Under the pale moonlight, the villagers sought a way to escape the infernal sight.

This world was far harsher than modern society as people lived far closer to death, and life meant little. Tragedies on the scale of bandit and monster attacks wiping out entire villages weren’t rare or unheard of. In this regard, the tragedy of Thelmis was just one of many taking place every day across the western continent.

Still, it was unusual for a medium-sized town protected by barrier pillars and walls reinforced by thaumaturgy to sustain damage like this. Even on this monster-infested, war-torn continent, no force had ever attacked the town of Thelmis like this since its founding three hundred years ago. The then King of Rhoadseria ordered the first Viscount Romaine to establish it, and the town had stood firm in the three centuries since.

That persistence wasn’t due to luck. Thelmis stood right between the citadel city of Heraklion—the country’s largest grain-producing area—and the town of Galatia, which stood at the Rhoadserian border with the southern kingdoms. As a result, Thelmis was a relay hub for the Heraklion-Galatia route.

For that reason, Thelmis had relatively strong defenses despite being a medium-sized town by definition. It didn't have a moat, but its defenses were made of stone, while most towns and villages had wooden palisades.

The governor of Thelmis, Viscount Romaine, had another town in his domain—his main stronghold in the city of Prolegia—as well as over ten villages. Besides the two hundred troops of the local militia, the viscounty also stationed fifty or so knights to defend Thelmis.

Had this been a domain near the border with a rival country, this would have been understandable. But Thelmis was well within Rhoadserian territory, with its position considered secure and its garrison unusually large. Even if a bandit group that numbered in the hundreds were to attack the town, this garrison would easily repel them.

Even for a respected noble family like the Romaine viscounty, keeping a force this large stationed there at all times was a financial burden. This just went to show that the tax income from Thelmis was big enough to return the investment that went into protecting it.

Such was precisely why the citizens of Thelmis never could have imagined a tragedy like what happened to their town tonight could take place. Reality was cruel, however. Just past midnight, the tightly locked city gates were forced open, and flames began spreading throughout Thelmis. The knights who forced the gate open began setting fire to the buildings.

There were roughly five to six hundred knights, and worse yet, all were capable of martial thaumaturgy. Their horses raced like the wind, and they handled them perfectly. It was like a storm of violence that exceeded human understanding. Mere humans lacked the power to oppose it, and many of the civilians could only watch in helpless amazement.

Some, however, picked up arms to defend themselves.

“Don't just stand there! Take up a sword or a spear! We have to fight them off!”

Civilians in this world had to be capable of defending themselves. With law enforcement having very little power here, people could only rely on themselves when faced with crisis or absurdity, and everyone had some weapon or another in their home. The citizens were weak, but they were not entirely incapable of retaliating.

Emboldened by that one civilian's words, the nearby men picked up whatever weapons they could find and stood in the knights' way. The two groups faced each other on the main streets, dividing Thelmis on its west and east sides. But just as both sides glared at each other, one man revealed himself from among the knights.

He was a large-built man with blond hair, brandishing a black

staff in his hand. As the civilians looked at him with hatred and animosity, the blond man announced, "I'm very sorry I have to say this, but your town will soon burn to the ground. However, we don't intend to kill any civilians. If you don't want to die, leave through the northern gate and run to Heraklion. We promise not to do you any harm."

With that said, the blond man looked around with a composed expression. His words carried an attacker's haughty confidence and the calm finality of an ultimatum. But perhaps this was the best show of kindness he could have made.

His lord had only ordered him to burn down the food and supplies in this town to strain the enemy army's supply line but not to needlessly torment the citizens of Thelmis. If the need called for it, the man wouldn't hesitate to burn the city down and kill its citizens, yet he wasn't a mad killer starving for blood.

The menacing air hanging about the man made the citizens freeze up. His sharp gaze didn't permit any objections from the civilians. Instead, they were transfixed in place like prey being glared at by a predator. But while this was true of most of them, a few civilians were an exception.

"Are you joking?! I can't just leave this city. My whole life is here!" a civilian exclaimed and charged at the man with a spear in hand.

Of course, he had no chance at victory. His anger at seeing his home destroyed made him lose all sense of reason and go on this reckless charge, effectively allowing him to shake off the menacing air the man had released. However, nothing but death would be the reward for his bravery.

The blond man then swung his staff, which whirled through the air with a howl, delivering a blow that instantly caved in the poor villager's head. It crushed his skull and splattered his brain. Blood splashed into the air, and it rendered everyone watching speechless with horror.

They could all imagine themselves meeting the same fate as their hands trembled in fear while gripping their weapons. But the blond man only glared at them, ensuring no one else resisted, then swung his staff again to shake off the blood and flesh sticking to its tip. He then raised a hand to signal his subordinates to follow and kicked his horse into motion, as if to say they had no time to waste here. They acted like everything was over, but no one dared to stop them. The villagers could only watch as the horsemen rode off and the crimson flames cast their glow upon their faces.

In the granary established in Thelmis' northwestern corner, a man was on his knees, looking at the burning warehouse in dismay. He

wore metallic armor, which implied he wasn't from this town. All around him were the corpses of the Thelmiss militia, their armor crushed. It seemed the man was their commander based on how they were scattered around him.

In this situation his status as a commander or general didn't matter. Even a knight capable of martial thaumaturgy couldn't stop the fire burning through the warehouse. All he could think of was the gold and silver emblem of a two-headed snake coiled around a sword. The snake's red eyes glinted menacingly from atop the banner of the cavaliers who set fire to this warehouse.

They had no intention of hiding who sent them, as only a single noble house used this banner in the whole western continent. But as far as the man knew, this attack should have been impossible.

"Why? How is the Mikoshiba barony's army marching on us?!" That question alone filled the man's thoughts. The shock of seeing the banner was overwhelming, and he thought he had seen it wrong at first. "But there's no mistaking it... The man leading those cavaliers was Signus Galveria!"



Galveria, along with Robert Bertrand and his long-shafted battle-ax, made up the duo of heroes praised as Count Salzberg's Twin Blades. Rumors of them had even reached the kingdom's south, and their appearances and distinctive weapons were well-known.

And to begin with, there can't be that many monsters on their level out there, right?!

The cavaliers stormed in, several hundred in number. Viscount Romaine maintained a small force of knights to help defend the city, and the garrison of Thelmiss was a sizable two hundred men. But they were no match for the Mikoshiba barony's cavaliers, who had all gained the power of martial thaumaturgy.

While the man was frustrated at this defeat, he could make peace with it as a warrior. He could fall back on the excuse of how their opponents clearly outnumbered them. But reality was much crueler than that, because all the soldiers lying dead around him now were *dispatched single-handedly by Signus Galveria*.

Each time he effortlessly swung his staff, it crushed the flesh and bones of this man's subordinates. The cavalry unit's mission was only to set fire to the granary, and this tragedy came about at the hands of only one man.

Not every one of Thelmiss' knights and militia had gathered there to oppose him, but there were still nearly thirty knights and a hundred militiamen. Very few men across Rhoadseria would have been able to slay this many soldiers, and most warriors of that caliber were fighting in the northern subjugation.

In other words, only two men could have possibly created this bloody scene: Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria.

But how does that make sense? How in the blasted hell did they send an army all the way to Thelmiss from the far north?

As one of Viscount Romaine's knights, this man received news of the goings-on in the northern subjugation. He heard the army took significant losses when the enemy razed the citadel city of Epirus. Other such news was that the siege of the fort built in the Tilt Mountains was in a stalemate, meaning they hadn't set foot in the Mikoshiba barony's domain yet.

Since Viscount Romaine took his conscripts with him to battle, they occasionally sent letters back, which was how this information reached as far as Thelmiss. But they still charged this man with defending the town in southern Rhoadseria, far away from the fighting. The Mikoshiba barony's army shouldn't have been able to reach this town because that would have meant that they had defeated the northern subjugation army and seized control of the country. And if that were to happen, the capital would have sent some

kind of message by now.

Even if the capital couldn't send a message for whatever reason, there were dozens of noble houses between Thelmis and Pireas. An army shouldn't have been able to slip by all of them and sneak up on Thelmis like this.

To begin with, wasn't the northern subjugation about to go on the offensive?!

The food stored in this granary was the mountain of supplies gathered by the trade companies stationed in Thelmis from the surrounding villages to support the large-scale offensive they were about to embark on. Gathering the absurd amount of food requested in the official directive sent to Thelmis required resorting to forceful measures that likely earned them the ire of those they bought these supplies from. But if it would enable the northern subjugation army to win the war, they were willing to take on such risks.

To know that the one who had issued that order was Mikhail Vanash, who was given full authority in the queen's absence from the capital, bothered the commander somewhat. Even so, the directive was an official order. His direct lord, Viscount Romaine, had also sent a letter saying they were about to go on the offensive, so the local commander had no choice but to comply.

However, the attackers had reduced his devoted effort and loyalty to ashes before his very eyes. As he realized what had happened, the granary began falling apart from the fire consuming it, and a piece of burning lumber fell over the man. The man didn't budge—the tragedy of Signus Galveria had already crushed his soul to nothing. Before long, an impact struck his head, and his consciousness faded away.

Soon after that moment, the man's body was buried in the burning wood and disappeared.

Two kilometers east of Thelmis, a pair of men met at the foot of a medium-sized hill and spoke. In their hands were binoculars, enchanted with endowed thaumaturgy to allow them to see even in the dark of night. Such a thing didn't originally exist in this world, of course, but there was nothing unusual about it for the two men. Even if they had never used it, they had seen it through comics and fiction.

They fixed their eyes in Thelmis's general direction as well as the cavaliers riding east and west from it.

"So that's Signus Galveria, indeed. He truly is a menacing monster..." said one of the men.

"Few people within the Organization can face him properly. He's on the level of a Hunting Dogs captain," the other replied.

"Yes, at the very least... We, at least, can't hope to fight him."

People summoned from Ryoma's world had a higher prana absorption rate when killing other life-forms, which granted them an

advantage over people native to this world. One could say that the amount of prana they would gain from killing one person was equivalent to what a native human would gain by killing ten people.

Conversely, a man from Ryoma's world who only killed one man couldn't match a human native to this world who absorbed the prana of tens of thousands. Even people from the other world also had individual differences in their mana absorption, and their prana absorption rate or chakras didn't solely decide their strength. Those were important factors in determining one's strength, but they were only one factor.

These two men knew they were no match for Signus, but this wasn't because they could gauge his strength properly. The power and skill he had exhibited in Thelmis were abnormal, but one could have pinned that on the fact the town's garrison was too weak. They were the guards of a medium-sized, peaceful town far from the front lines that thought they could fill that role.

But Signus was a warrior only a few in this entire country could match. A single swing from his staff would claim the lives of most men, as demonstrated by how the fights before had ended with a single blow. Because of this, the men could tell he was strong but couldn't measure just how powerful he was.

The other man met his partner's words with a glance and a shake of the head.

"We have little choice and have to report what we've seen," the first man said.

"Right... We just need to follow our orders."

They were both operatives of the Organization and had two tasks here. The first was to supply the Mikoshiba barony troops moving up the Thebes River with war steeds. The second was to observe the army after delivering the horses and report on the quality of the soldiers and their commanders.

For the first task, the only complication was that the magistrate in Heraklion, from whom they received the horses, scolded them for changing the delivery date without warning. But for their second task, they needed to make a rather silly-sounding report.

After all, every soul in Rhoadseria knew that Signus was a skilled warrior and saying it would just be repeating the obvious. But they couldn't very well mobilize the Organization's trump card, the Hunting Dogs, just for the sake of appraising how strong he was.

"You know, when we asked Heraklion's magistrate to deliver the horses, I wondered why he was willing to side with us here, but... Yeah, if he has a monster like this guy on his side, I can understand why he wouldn't want to make an enemy of that Mikoshiba kid."

"Apparently Zheng, Liu Daijin's assistant, applied pressure on him.

And if that's true, it only makes sense he'd cooperate," added the other man

The first man grimaced unpleasantly and replied, "The rumor about that one commander who disappeared years ago turning up again? I've heard about it, but do you really believe that made-up story?"

This was something of a rumor spreading among the Organization's members, but most doubted its credibility. It was just too absurd to take seriously, but the other man gave a surprising answer.

"Personally, I think there's some truth to it."

The first man pulled away from his binoculars and looked at his partner with surprise and replied, "Are you being real? From what I hear, the commander that turned up again disappeared into the dimensional void fifty years ago when the return spell was activated. If that story is true, why wouldn't the higher-ups tell us about it?"

For a member of the Organization, that story came across as utter nonsense. It was like a free diver saying they explored the bottom of the Mariana Trench or someone saying they dived into an active volcano naked and swam through lava.

A person returning from the dimensional void was unthinkable, and it wasn't even worth questioning its possibility. It was the kind of exaggerated idea that wouldn't even come up in a children's cartoon, completely lacking in reality.

To this man, even if it was just a rumor, he'd expect whoever made it up to at least try to make it slightly more believable. But to the Organization and its members, the dimensional void was the biggest obstacle on their way back home to their own Earth, and establishing a way to cross it safely was their biggest goal. It was because they couldn't surmount that wall that they had to live in this hell of a world.

So if what his partner said was right and the rumor was true, then the Organization's top brass surely would have said something about it by now. His partner denied that idea, though.

"Even if he could make it back, there's no point if they can't recreate the method by which he did it. So they'd keep it secret, right? And putting aside whether the rumor is true, the top brass did decide to side with the Mikoshiba kid all of a sudden. And if they did it because an old leader that's related to him showed up, that explains why they did it."

He was quite close to the truth, and if Zheng and Veronica had heard what he just said, they would have surely gone pale with surprise. They would then have him swear to hold his tongue, if not silence him altogether.

Thankfully, they weren't there to listen to this conversation. Hearing his partner's explanation, the first man laughed and said, "Don't you think that's kind of a leap in logic? It's a little too good to be true, isn't it? I'll admit the top brass seem to side with the kid an awful lot. But they're only doing it because the Organization stands to profit from it, you know?"

"Well, that's true, but..." his partner had to nod in agreement. He wasn't fully convinced about his theory either.

The two of them finished their talk, put away their binoculars, and straddled their horses, which were tied to a nearby tree.

"Anyway, let's get back and report in!"

"Yeah. I imagine the group that was scouting Robert is back already."

"And we should be getting intel about the other woman too... Once we have enough info on her, we report it to the top."

The men had been ordered to investigate the strength of Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. Both had witnessed a mysterious woman when they delivered the horses, but they weren't told to look into her. In that regard, perhaps they didn't need to examine any further.

But something felt off about her. This was perhaps the first man's sixth sense at work. As such, he had his comrades gather information about this woman. He added, "Let's go!"

The two then kicked their horses into a gallop and began riding back to camp to report what they found to the Organization. But the two of them didn't know that the truth was closer than they knew.

When their comrades reported the woman's identity to them, the two men were shocked at what they'd learned.



It had been a few days since Signus burned down the town of Thelmis. The top of a nearby small mountain was a short distance from Heraklion, southern Rhoadseria's largest agricultural center. Below it spanned the highway leading to the capital, Epirus.

The highway was full of countless carriages with food and supplies gathered from Heraklion's region that headed north. A mixed unit composed of the surrounding nobles' domains and knights based in Heraklion of roughly five thousand men guarded this supply unit.

Their expressions were all tense, especially that of the supply unit's captain, as they knew the supplies they carried would decide the outcome of the fierce battle in the north. Another thing they knew was that the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers had reached these southern lands to sever the northern subjugation army's supply line, waiting for a chance to stop them.

Fortunately, they prepared thoroughly for this possibility and sent scout units ahead in every direction to confirm they were safe. However, standing on the top of the mountain overlooking the supply unit was a group of three men and women.

"It all went as you said," Robert told the woman beside him. "I can see why the lord was counting on you. You're one cunning vixen of a woman."

Despite his crude tone being something that most women would likely frown upon, he didn't intend to insult her. Yet the woman didn't seem to take offense to it, and being called a vixen only made her bring a hand to her lips with an amused smile.

She was Ecclesia Marinelle, a general of the Kingdom of Myest and the one dispatched on this mission as its commander.

"Oh, I think you're overestimating me. But I will say 'vixen' is a cuter nickname than 'the Whirlwind,'" she said with confidence.

The other man, Signus, scolded his partner, "Hey, Robert, show some respect. Lady Ecclesia is an important figure dispatched from Myest to help us."

His warning was natural as Ecclesia was the King of Myest's niece. She had a claim to the throne, albeit a very weak one, which meant she was a woman of lofty status. Robert, however, laughed off his remark as if his friend baffled him.

"You just don't get it, Robert."

"I don't get what?"

"We're not talking to General Ecclesia Marinelle of Myest, are we? After all, the Kingdom of Myest made a pact with Queen Lupis."

Signus grimaced at Robert's suggestive comment. He was right, and if Ecclesia were to join their army as Myest's general, it would create a major diplomatic scandal. Ecclesia herself agreed with Robert's assertion.

"He's quite right. I'm nothing but a Myestian mercenary by the name of Ecclesia at the moment. I simply happen to share my name with Myest's general. But it's nothing but pure coincidence, so both of you can feel free to regard me casually," she said, closing one eye and flashing a jesting, mischievous smirk.

No one would side with Signus on this matter, it seemed. He sighed, gave a light shrug, and said, "Very well... All right then, Ecclesia the mercenary. Do we carry things out according to your plan?"

His approach with a "mere mercenary" was still a bit too formal, but no one corrected him. Ecclesia had no intention of commenting on his attitude toward her any longer.

"Yes, the preparations are complete." Ecclesia nodded in response. "I'll be counting on you two to pull your weight. We're facing a force

three times our size, after all.” A smile then overtook her beautiful features. “Our prey has peeked their heads out of their hole. Now the hunt begins, and I’ll be working you two to the bone.”

“Yeah, my axe arm’s already twitching.”

“We’ll do all in our power to answer your expectations.”

Robert and Signus nodded respectfully, but they both had the same ferocious smile of predators who’d just eyed their prey. A beautiful fox led these ravenous wolves that licked their lips expectantly. The weapons in their hands cried out for the crimson lifeblood of their foes all the while.

Several hours later, the supply unit arrived at the banks of the Thebes River.

“So far, so good...” said the captain of the supply unit.

Their faces were full of relief because they’d usually send the supply unit out after wiping out the Mikoshiba barony unit. Tales of how pressed the northern subjugation army was for food reached them through letters the soldiers sent to their families. Given the dire circumstances, the capital and the magistrate of Heraklion had to dispatch the supply convoy as quickly as possible.

Thankfully, the Mikoshiba barony army has its sights set on Heraklion’s south right now.

Yesterday, the Mikoshiba barony army raided the towns and villages around Heraklion and burned down their food reserves. It was a painful blow, but all the towns attacked were south of the city.

It was safe to assume they were hitting the towns one by one while moving north. Indeed, each village had its food stored in the large towns in each area and handed it off to Heraklion once it reached a fixed amount. Even a major city like Heraklion didn’t have enough food to feed an army of two hundred thousand kept in one place. It was a problem both in terms of storage space and crisis management.

And I find it hard to believe the enemy will do something as reckless as attack Heraklion.

In that regard, hitting the surrounding cities, which were much less defended, made much more sense. Thelmis was a town that invested a great deal of effort into its defense. Yet it was still an easier target when compared to a citadel city like Heraklion. And so, the magistrate of Heraklion decided to use the Mikoshiba army’s plans against them.

In other words, he discarded the towns to the south of Heraklion so they would serve as bait for the Mikoshiba barony army. If they took the bait, he could use that time to send the supply unit to the capital. And to that end, he had the soldiers he gathered from the surrounding towns guard the supply unit rather than search for the

enemy army.

Given time, he could devise many other plans. But as more and more messengers arrived, demanding that the supply unit be dispatched at once, he had no other choice. Seeing that most soldiers were part of the northern subjugation army, they had very few available men to work with. In this regard, the magistrate's choice was apt.

At the very least, those starved beasts wouldn't attack their army as long as they had prey to feed on. This was why the commander of the supply unit obeyed those orders without question. And so far, the gamble seemed to pay off.

"For now, let's hurry up and cross the Thebes... So long as we cross the river, we should be able to rest easily," the captain added.

The great Thebes River divided Rhoadseria in two and was the biggest obstacle from Heraklion to the capital, Pireas. To this end, the commander sent an advance unit ahead to secure a crossing point and acquire boats from the surrounding towns and villages. There were also multiple harbors set along the flow of the Thebes to ensure they could cross the river as soon as possible.

All of this was done to ensure they would safely cross this difficult point. But the captain's wish would go ungranted, in the most cruel way possible.

It happened just as the first group of boats had finished boarding and were preparing to set sail. Suddenly, the captain heard battle cries, and countless arrows were aimed at the boats and fired from the shrubbery behind the crossing point.

"Fire arrows!"

The arrows hit the sails and hulls of the boats, sprouting smoke and flames wherever they struck. Since a bit of water could put out those flames, the unknown archers fired many arrows and overwhelmed the boats so they would burn. In all likelihood, these weren't ordinary fire arrows either.

The boats burned, billowing out black smoke. These conditions made the soldiers try to quickly extinguish the fires, but there were too many fire arrows to stop the hulls and sails from catching fire.

"It can't be! An enemy attack?!"

The unexpected sight rendered the captain speechless. In this world, people absorbed the life force of any life-form they killed, which they could convert into their own power through martial thaumaturgy. Distance greatly influenced prana absorption, and because of that, use of bows and arrows was not popular.

If one were to hypothesize that killing an opponent with a melee weapon like a sword or spear grants its killer one hundred prana, the prana they would gain for shooting an enemy to death from afar

would be fewer than ten. Depending on the situation, it could go as low as one prana. Such was the primary reason people rarely used verbal thaumaturgy or bows and arrows in this world's warfare.

However, this was mostly true for the knight class, which emphasized mastering thaumaturgy, and in terms of tactics, being able to attack from afar without being counterattacked was a clear advantage. This was why most countries employed a court thaumaturgist, and had units of verbal thaumaturgists, and bows and arrows were commonly used in siege battles.

Because of this, the captain was somewhat familiar with bows. But what he saw take place before his eyes bashed his common sense against the rocks.

"Just how far are they shooting those arrows?! Their arrows shouldn't possibly hit at this distance!" the captain exclaimed.

The distance between the shooters and the boats was seven hundred to eight hundred meters at a minimum. They were far enough away that the captain couldn't see them with the naked eye. But that shouldn't have been possible. As far as the captain knew, a bow's range was two hundred to three hundred meters, yet these arrows flew nearly three times that range.

Of course, getting an arrow to get that far wasn't entirely impossible. Martial thaumaturgy reinforced one's brute strength, allowing one to draw the strings of bows that ordinary men wouldn't be capable of using. However, that only happened when highly skilled warriors, who were few in number, used the finest bows that were difficult to come by. And right now, there were enough arrows raining down to blot out the sky.

And the nightmare didn't end there. A cavalry unit was riding in from afar, knocking away the fences built around the crossing point and charging into their formation. And the moment the captain saw the torches in their hands, he shouted in alarm.

"Oh, no! Cavaliers! Stop the cavaliers! They're trying to set fire to the food! Stop them!"

But the soldiers were still shocked by the fire arrows and incapable of reacting normally. They weren't sure whether to focus on putting out the fires or blocking the enemy. This wasn't a state where they could exhibit their usual prowess. Even if they could, it wouldn't have changed the outcome because two beasts in human form, known as the Twin Blades, led the cavalry unit.

The two men leading the charge howled in unison. It was like the roaring of beasts, and as they shouted, they also swung their long-handled weapons in sweeping motions.

One of them swung a large axe that cut through flesh, and the other wielded a metallic staff that shattered the skulls of whomever it

hit. They rode with nothing stopping them like they were advancing through an open road. And following in their wake were one thousand cavaliers.

Their charge had all the penetrating and destructive force of a giant battering ram, and no brave heroes stood in their way. Even if there were, they would meet the same end.

“Burn it all! Burn everything!” Robert shouted while spinning his war axe overhead with his face drenched in the enemy’s blood, which he didn’t seem to mind.

The same was true of Signus, who was typically Robert’s voice of reason. But the fact he was usually more restrained and sound of mind meant that once he cut loose, he became even more violent and unhinged than his partner.

Signus looked like a demon who rode straight out of hell. Blood and chunks of flesh belonging to the unfortunate soldiers he slew covered his armor. He delivered powerful, blunt blows strong enough to smash his opponents’ bodies beyond recognition—a terrible way to die.

But the supply unit’s tragedy did not end there. The cavalry behind Robert and Signus used the opening the men had created to ride in, their steeds’ hooves rattling the ground. It was a force of one thousand, plus another five hundred who seemed like they originally were cavalry archers. They were likely the ones who fired the fire arrows earlier, but now they brandished spears, thrusting them at whoever was in their path.

Ecclesia, who was at the back of the line, took command and yelled, “There’s no need to take prisoners. Kill them all!”

A cold, ruthless order, but no one objected to it. The soldiers would slay their enemies as ordered since they knew this was the safest way to ensure their survival and that of their allies. After all, they were deep in enemy territory, far from their stronghold and home base in Sirius. Even if they took prisoners, they wouldn’t be able to manage their imprisonment properly.

To begin with, Ecclesia and her group were at a significant numerical disadvantage. They were able to keep the enemy army confused thanks to their barrage of arrows and having two monsters like Robert and Signus leading the charge. But once they regained their composure, the situation could easily swing in the enemy’s favor.

The soldiers fighting on the front lines understood this better than anyone, and Ecclesia wanted to minimize losses as much as possible.

But even if the enemies regain their composure, these men aren’t likely to lose. When comparing them to the soldiers on the other side, the outcome of this battle seemed clear. *It’s like a bunch of children fighting a group of adults.*

This was her appraisal, with the Mikoshiba barony soldiers being the adults and the Rhoadserian soldiers being the children.

How in the world did he train soldiers like these?

As the Kingdom of Myest's general, Ecclesia had commanded many soldiers over the years, and her experience told her that the quality of the Mikoshiba barony's army was of an excellent standard. It wasn't because of anything as simple as all its soldiers being capable of martial thaumaturgy. That was fearsome in and of itself, but what made them truly impressive was how every soldier was knowledgeable and capable of thinking on their feet.

The soldiers' literacy rate was one hundred percent and not just limited to writing their names. They could all read books, a privilege usually reserved for only the wealthiest of nobles and commoners. Knowing that the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers were capable of this was astounding. One could go so far as to say that their rank-and-file soldiers were all trained and educated to the same extent as knights were in Rhoadseria.

Even the army of Ecclesia's homeland, the Kingdom of Myest, hadn't achieved that much. Victory seemed guaranteed with those two monsters, Robert and Signus, leading proficient soldiers. *And with this, we'll have achieved our goal. All that will be left is to wait and see how that man performs.*

Ecclesia then looked on with a composed smile as screams, battle cries, and black smoke hung over the battlefield.

†

A few hours later, the curtain of night descended over the world and the stench of roasting flesh hung in the air. It was by no means an appetizing scent, as it was the smell of soldiers' flesh burning.

But to the three beasts that spawned this tragedy, the scent was familiar.

"So this is how it ends..." Ecclesia said.

"Yeah. All according to plan," responded Robert as he nodded and looked around.

Regardless of the direction he turned, he saw burning tents, wagons, and corpses. The battle had been decided, and the only other thing in sight was the wharf burning and billowing with embers.

"Well, they only sent second-rate soldiers here. Dealing with them wasn't a problem," Signus said with his usual, serene smile.

"Yes. With this, the supplies cannot reach their destination, and as that man planned, the northern subjugation army will face hell. So we have to get moving soon," Ecclesia said.

Robert and Signus nodded, then gathered their army and began their march north onto their next battlefield.

Before long, the boats all burned away and sank to the bottom of the river, and only then did the Thebes truly regain its silence. This event was a prelude to the hardships the northern subjugation army would face.

Chapter 3: A Trap for a Trap

That day, a runner arrived at the Rhoadserian capital of Pireas to deliver a surprising report on the events that transpired near the southern city of Heraklion. When the runner knocked on Mikhail Vanash's office door, still catching his breath, Mikhail raised his head unpleasantly. After all, the captain was currently running all affairs in the castle.

He received all manner of paperwork, much of which didn't pertain to the northern subjugation, forcing him to work day and night. So he knew that any urgent report from Heraklion couldn't be good news.

Probably a report about them having trouble gathering the supplies we ordered, he thought.

Mikhail knew that the demands he made of them were excessive. He had asked them to gather enough food to feed an army of two hundred thousand soldiers and other necessary supplies. While the Heraklion region was fertile land known as Rhoadseria's breadbasket, even it had a limit for how much food it could procure. It would have been another story if they had gathered this food over some time, but on such short notice, they had to resort to forceful measures.

Still, if the northern subjugation army lifted itself out of its predicament, it would have to go the distance and make painful decisions.

At worst, we may have to deploy units from the capital too.

But the fact Mikhail had that thought cross his mind was optimistic of him. He assumed that southern Rhoadseria was far from the front lines of this civil war, so any problems there couldn't amount to anything of major importance.

The moment Mikhail read the report, he felt the blood drain from his face.

"Impossible... Is this report true?"

As he examined the report again, Mikhail's hands trembled as its content was alarming. After reading over it a few more times, he realized he didn't misunderstand anything and threw his black-rimmed glasses over the table.

This pair of glasses was one he bought after his house arrest ended following the previous civil war, when the O'tormean Empire invaded Xarooda. He had done so as an attempt to broaden his interests and

horizons beyond just swordplay.



There were a few reasons he bought those glasses. By his own admission, Mikhail was something of a meathead with a frank, impulsive personality. He was more in his element cutting into the enemy army than leading soldiers. Being one of the leading swordsmen in Rhoadseria and highly loyal to the royal family, he was a man whose only talents lay in combat.

Despite fighting being his favored field, Mikhail made a fatal mistake during the civil war. His attempt to chase down and defeat Kael Iruna, a traitor who had turned his back on Queen Lupis and sided with Duke Gelhart, got him captured instead. And that led to Duke Gelhart using him as a bargaining chip.

When Meltina told him the decision Queen Lupis had to make to save his life, Mikhail wailed in despair. Despite being her aide, his petty ambition and envy toward Ryoma Mikoshiba clouded his judgment, which sabotaged his beloved queen's rise to power.

Having realized his faults, Mikhail did gain new knowledge, hoping he would find some other way to contribute to Rhoadseria's reforms and lighten the strain on Queen Lupis. As such, Mikhail took to doing bureaucratic tasks and paperwork, roles that he once mocked as "gutless work" since they didn't involve going to battle. He realized that it was precisely tasks like handling paperwork that were necessary for managing a country.

In this world, glasses—which required lenses adjusted precisely to the specifications of their wearer—were quite expensive. So expensive that it would be difficult to afford them even with the yearly salary of the common citizen living in the capital. Mikhail's resolve to better himself was enough to justify such a pricey investment.

And Mikhail just threw those precious spectacles onto the table in the heat of the moment. That was how great the shock he had just received was. A few days ago, he breathed out in relief when he dispatched the supply unit from Pireas to the front lines. But the supplies he sent were only an emergency reserve that would keep the soldiers' morale from dropping because food ran out.

After all, when the northern subjugation began, they gathered supplies from all around the capital. Despite buying supplies for much higher than the market price this time, they had only scrounged up the bare minimum. So he had planned that the supplies sent from the southern areas would make up the deficit. But the report he just received made his supply plan evaporate.

"The Mikoshiba barony army raided and wiped out the supply unit... And over half the stockpiles in the Heraklion area were destroyed? That can't be... Just how did they...?!" Mikhail leaned against his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. He heaved a

heavy sigh, then looked up. *The Mikoshiba barony army should be holed up in Fort Tilt. When did they send a raid party to attack the south?*

Mikhail, of course, had considered the possibility that Ryoma would march from his fortress in the Tilt Mountains to intercept the supply unit. It was clear that the Mikoshiba barony was trying to defeat the northern subjugation army using starvation tactics.

Typically in siege battles, starvation tactics were employed by the aggressor on the defending army. Normally, the northern subjugation army would be the ones starving out the Mikoshiba barony. Somehow the enemy had flipped the script in this scenario, which was indeed a clever ploy.

Considering the size of the northern subjugation army, it was clear that this ploy took advantage of one of the weaknesses inherent to having a vast army. Early in the conflict, Ryoma occupied the country's north and drove out its citizens, forcing them into Queen Lupis's arms. That, too, was part of his starvation tactics.

It's a good plan... I will grant that much.

And for the starvation tactics to succeed, one needs to keep the enemy cut off from their supply line. The objective was also to ensure they remained cut off from said supplies, even if it was difficult.

That's why I sent out a scout unit, so the supply unit wasn't attacked when they passed the Tilt Mountains.

This was a sound decision, given the geographical distance between Pireas and the Tilt Mountains. No matter how large the Rhoadserian army was, it couldn't be everywhere at once to guard the entire surface of the country.

Keeping an eye on the areas around the battlefield was important. Though, it seemed Ryoma Mikoshiba scoffed at Mikhail's attempts at caution and outsmarted him.

"To think he'd attack Heraklion, the source of our supplies..." The more he tried to think about it, the less it made sense. *To begin with, how did Mikoshiba slip his army through our encirclement and get all the way to the south? Could one of the nobles be in cahoots with him?*

On the surface, most of the nobles scorned Ryoma Mikoshiba, seeing him as an upstart. But Mikhail was aware some nobles were taken in, or rather fooled, by his capabilities.

The most likely suspects would be the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph, but they cast aside their domains to flee to Mikoshiba's side for safety. So who else could it be?

Those were the two most influential figures who sided with Ryoma, and they went so far as to turn their backs on the country for him. Even though Ryoma shocked many nobles during his evening party, that wasn't to say they swore allegiance to the Mikoshiba barony.

I suppose in that regard, Viscount Gelhart seems suspicious. Could it be?

Several possibilities crossed Mikhail's mind, only to be written off instantly. He had no proof to back any of them. He eventually gave up trying to figure out who the culprit was. No amount of thinking would answer this question, and he didn't have the leisure to look for the culprit.

No. At this point, it doesn't matter who did this. Either way, I must let Queen Lupis know about this.

The first round of supplies he sent the other day wouldn't suffice for the northern subjugation army's needs. It would only last them a week at best, or a month if they were incredibly good at rationing it. But past that, the army would slip into outright starvation, and the war would become a decidedly losing battle. At worst, the soldiers could even rebel.

Then what are we supposed to do?

They couldn't call off the northern subjugation now since they hadn't even conquered Fort Tilt. It was a bad sign not being able to invade the enemy domain in the Wortenia Peninsula. If they recalled the soldiers at this point, everyone in this country, namely the nobles, would see this war as a loss for Queen Lupis.

Should that happen, Queen Lupis would only have two options left. She could retain the throne and become a puppet ruler for the nobles. Another option was for her to take responsibility for losing the war and have the throne usurped from her by Princess Radine.

And if that happens, the nobles will regain momentum after we curtailed it so much. In the end, my blunder from back then continues to haunt us even now. A bitter thought crossed Mikhail's heart.

Radine Rhoadserians was a princess that shouldn't have existed. She did have silver hair, which marked her as a blood relative of the Rhoadserians royal house. But those physical attributes and the pendant passed down by the Rhoadserian kings that were in her possession were the only things that proved that she was the late king's daughter.

The pendant was confirmed to be authentic and belong to the Rhoadserian royal house, but that didn't guarantee that she was a genuine princess just by virtue of having it.

And the man who presented her is the biggest problem here. The image of a smug, suspicious middle-aged man crossed Mikhail's mind. *Akitake Sudou... He's certainly a skilled, useful man. But he's impossible to read.*

The mysterious man had worked secretly under the former Duke Gelhart during the civil war. In terms of shadiness, he was just like Ryoma Mikoshiba, an unfamiliar man from an unknown background.

Following the civil war, his status as Princess Radine's aide allowed him to move about the palace like he owned the place. And when it was necessary to send forces to Xarooda, he had suggested to Mikhail that they should put Mikoshiba to use.

Originally, Mikhail loathed the man. But when he learned how useful he was, he began using Sudou for his own ends. Thanks to Sudou's help, Mikhail regained his position as Queen Lupis's aide despite everyone looking down on him for his failings during the civil war. Of course, some of that was due to Mikhail's change in attitude and efforts as he worked his hardest to clear his good name.

But the way of the world was that effort alone wasn't enough to guarantee one received a reward. Particularly in Rhoadseria's noble society, no one was kind enough to help a downtrodden underdog.

In that regard, without Sudou's maneuvering, even Queen Lupis's endorsement wouldn't have been enough for Mikhail to regain his position by her side. Because of that, Mikhail and Sudou could be seen as allies. But the former never trusted the other.

Sudou said he sought out Princess Radine, and that alone did nothing to confirm her authenticity. Mikhail and Meltina still believed that Radine was a fake princess.

But at this rate, that fake princess could end up claiming the throne of the old, storied Rhoadserian kingdom.

That possibility was something Mikhail couldn't allow, and the fact his own reckless blunder was part of the cause behind it filled him with a great sense of urgency. The only way to avoid this worst possible future was for Queen Lupis to defeat Ryoma Mikoshiba and win this war. But the question was how they would do that.

Beating Fort Tilt in a short period of time is impossible. Using siege weapons should be especially hard in that terrain, and the fortress walls had thaumaturgical barrier seals applied to them. If they had to get inside, they'd need to do as Meltina detailed in her letter and scale the walls to the sides of the fort. But that method is likely too dangerous to work.

However, the Mikoshiba barony had seasoned mercenaries and knights who excelled at fighting on cliffs and mountaintops.

And then there's his spy group.

Another problem was that scaling the cliffs meant the northern subjugation army would lose its biggest strength—its numbers. The fundamental strategies were to use nature to one's advantage, rely on helpful terrain, and remain composed.

But the Mikoshiba barony had the edge in terrain and composure, leaving only one conclusion.

We'll have to settle this in an open field.

The northern subjugation army held the advantage in sheer numbers, but the hardships this time were because of Ryoma

Mikoshiba's plans. This allowed him to avoid risking a fight on the open plains.

The question is how we're going to force him onto our battlefield, but... This was the answer Mikhail was seeking right now. *Taunting and jeering aren't going to make that man lose his temper and leave the fort. He'd just hold his tongue and ignore us.*

The northern subjugation army was very much a wounded animal caught in a trap known as Fort Tilt. No amount of snarling or barking would get the hunter to act. Ryoma would just stay holed up in his fort until the animal started to waste away and died on its own. Mikhail could easily imagine this, yet the fact remained that this was their most effective plan.

But then, as Mikhail looked up at the ceiling, an idea came to him like divine inspiration.

Yes, this could work! This plan could defeat that man! It was a dangerous gamble, and if it went wrong, it could lead to Queen Lupis dying in battle. She would meet the same end anyway if they did nothing at all. *Then we may as well go for all or nothing. To do that, we'll need to make preparations to ensure we can take that gamble.*

Mikhail picked up the bell on his desk and rang it; his adjutant entered the room.

"Gather the soldiers around the capital posthaste," Mikhail shouted at him urgently. "Collect any man you can, understood? Mobilize the guard in the nearby noble territories too. Anyone who resists will be punished for treason!"

"Sir, what are you saying all of a sudden?" asked his adjutant, confused by the unexpected order.

His doubts were reasonable ones, but Mikhail angrily rose from his chair and shouted at the baffled adjutant, "Stop dawdling! We haven't a second to wait!"

His shout sent his adjutant bolting out of the room. Without even seeing him leave, Mikhail once again sank into his seat.

Though he may have had the authority to handle matters in the queen's absence, calling soldiers from noble territories would exceed his authority. Since this was a gamble, they'd need a guarantee in case their plan failed.

This is for the best. If I just claim responsibility for everything, people should excuse me soon enough.

It was a painful decision Mikhail made, as if it were an expression of his guilt. Anyway, he put his discarded glasses back on and began writing a letter of advice to Queen Lupis.

Mikoshiba... I will turn your plans on you! An eye for an eye, a trap for a trap!

All the while, he believed that his action would ensure the

kingdom's future.

A few days had passed since Mikhail made his decision. Thick clouds hung over the sky, blocking off the moonlight and rendering the stars invisible. It was as if the sky was hinting at the Rhoadserian kingdom's fate. The curtain of the night hung just as heavily over the northern subjugation army's campsite. Most of the soldiers slept soundly, covered in their thin blankets.

In the midst of this, Lupis Rhoadserians rested her elbows on the desk set in her tent with her chin on her hands, lost in thought. Sitting across from her was her right-hand woman, Meltina Lecter, and the commander of the northern subjugation army, Helena Steiner.

For the three women leading this army, they had no time to sleep in this situation. A letter Mikhail had sent from the capital lay on the desk between the three women.

"To think the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers got as far as the south..." Meltina uttered.

It was a bolt from the blue for all three of them as this development left them stunned and in disbelief. But while they all froze up, the most experienced woman present, Helena, was the first to regain her bearings.

"It's a surprise, that much is for certain, but Mikhail's report is in all likelihood no mistake... In which case, we would be better off trying to think of what to do next rather than waste our time trying to figure out how the Mikoshiba barony army got all the way to Heraklion."

It was a reasonable idea. If they had lost the supplies from Heraklion, rather than think about how it happened, it would be more prudent to decide what to do next.

"Agreed. Helena is right," Queen Lupis said, regaining her composure.

"I think so too. Your Highness..." added Meltina, nodding

Even so, they didn't have many plays they could make in this situation and had to pick one of two choices. The northern subjugation army would either use the tactic Mikhail suggested in his letter and challenge Ryoma to a decisive battle or fall back to the capital. Going to battle wasn't a bad idea since the letter indicated Mikhail would gather soldiers near the capital as insurance if the plan failed. At worst, they could consider carrying this out near Epirus.



But it would be a great price to pay because Queen Lupis would stand on the battlefield herself. On the off chance the enemy army attacked their stronghold, she could end up losing her life.

And there were other problems at play.

Sir Mikhail... Such a reckless idea, thought Meltina.

She focused on the last line in his letter, where he mentioned gathering the soldiers of the nobles near the capital. It made sense as an emergency measure, and assembling a rear guard was a good tactical judgment.

Politically speaking, it was a dangerous measure. Even if the plan worked and they won the war, the nobles would surely blame Mikhail for infringing on their rights. That went beyond the issue of whether they won the war, pressing a blade against the matter of the nobles' vested interests.

The nobles would resist, and given the current state of the northern subjugation, Queen Lupis wouldn't be able to shield Mikhail from their criticism. He wouldn't receive a death sentence, but would be placed under house arrest and demoted for his actions.

If the plan failed, the decisive battle would happen near the capital, as Mikhail predicted. In that case, the odds of him being publicly punished were low. Executing one of their own commanders while enemies knocked at the gate would be utterly absurd, and even the foolish nobles would know better.

But that would still be a death warrant for Sir Mikhail. Even so...

A lack of formal punishment would mean he'd have to atone for his deeds through action. But the outcome of that was clear—given Mikhail Vanash's personality, he would fight to his last breath and seek a place to die.

The problem was that there was no way to prevent that outcome. Mikhail wasn't asking Queen Lupis for permission to gather the troops near the capital; he was reporting that he used his authority as her proxy to summon them.

Regardless of whether we use his plan, having soldiers in the capital would give us a breadth of options. In that regard, it was the right decision. Meltina was torn between the countless reasons to go with that plan, her fear of the possibility of her queen's death, and her colleague's resolve unto death. *Perhaps we really should pull back and regroup.*

Even Meltina knew this plan was far from ideal, but she couldn't consent to a gamble that put her queen's life on the line. However, Helena seemed to come to a different conclusion from Meltina, one worthy of her title Ivory Goddess of War.

"I think we should go with the plan Sir Mikhail suggested."

Meltina's face went pale, and she responded, "I think it's too

dangerous. Yes, if we go with his plan, we might seize victory. But if it goes wrong, Her Majesty's life could be in danger! Compared to that, we're better off playing by the book and retreating to regroup at the capital, no?"

Adopting Mikhail's plan of using enemy's starvation tactics as a reason to retreat and luring out the enemy army into giving pursuit could, if it went wrong, lead to the collapse of the entire northern subjugation army. It would be tantamount to challenging the enemy to a battle where both sides would die.

Helena, though, shook her head in response to Meltina's misgivings. She then said, "I am well aware of the risks. But if I'm allowed to be harsh, if we try to retreat now, we have no future either way."

At the least, going about the northern subjugation with an army of two hundred thousand would not be possible. It was clear that if the nobles, who were the official owners of the troops Mikhail gathered, were to return to the capital, command of their soldiers would return to them. Once the nobles returned to Pireas, they would immediately return to their domains and refuse to heed Queen Lupis's call to arms again.

From their perspective, she would look like an incompetent queen who failed to invade the enemy's domain despite having such a large army. They would have no reason to follow such a useless sovereign. All three women in the tent knew this, and Meltina couldn't refute Helena's words.

Helena looked at Meltina with pitying eyes as she spoke to Queen Lupis. "Besides, Mikhail's plan is solely based on the premise of our army retreating. So regardless of how we decide to go about this plan, the northern subjugation ends here and now."

"In which case, we may as well gamble on the plan that could secure victory for us?" Queen Lupis asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Queen Lupis pursed her lips. After finally settling her thoughts, she gravely said, "If we go with Mikhail's plan, is there a chance Ryoma Mikoshiba will leave that fort?"

That was the first doubt Queen Lupis had in mind upon reading Mikhail's proposal. Helena, however, shook her head and spoke up.

"Of course, there's a good chance the Mikoshiba barony will simply remain in their fort and watch us retreat. But this isn't to say the Mikoshiba barony isn't under pressure either."

Meltina and Queen Lupis looked at her, puzzled, and Helena further explained her thoughts.

"Yes. For now, everything seems to be going in the Mikoshiba barony's favor. But they had to pay a great price to make that

happen.”

The biggest problem was that they had evacuated the citizens of northern Rhoadseria and razed the citadel city of Epirus. Tactically speaking, those were effective plans, but financially, it was a completely different story. All the goods that arrived on the Wortenia Peninsula via sea trade were sold across Rhoadseria using the merchant union in Epirus.

No matter how high the demand for those goods was, there wouldn't be any business without a seller to contact the customers. And as a noble house, the Mikoshiba barony lacked the time and the means to build a large-scale distribution network. Due to this, the Christof company managed trade with other countries while the merchant union handled trade within Rhoadseria. It was through the distribution networks built over many years by those firms that the Mikoshiba barony's goods circulated all across the kingdom.

But before the northern subjugation began, each firm reduced the scale of its distribution network. It was clear why—the northern subjugation would be a clash between the Mikoshiba barony and the Rhoadserian kingdom itself. If the firms hadn't done this and stopped selling the Mikoshiba barony's goods, Queen Lupis would order the nobles to stop dealing with those firms and confiscate all their merchandise and assets for associating with a rebelling army.

To prevent that, the firms stopped their distribution and withdrew from the capital. But while that decision was reasonable, it came at a considerable cost. They had to sacrifice Pireas and its considerable trade sphere, even if their dealings weren't based solely within Rhoadseria. The firms were engaging in trade with Myest and Xarooda as part of the four kingdom union led by Helnesgoula, so it wasn't to say that their finances had no other options.

But financially retreating from Rhoadseria was a major blow to the Mikoshiba barony. And their razing plan reduced the north of the kingdom and Epirus to ashes. With the firms forced to pull out of their base of operations in Epirus, their functions had ground to a halt.

So the most realistic way they had to resolve those financial problems would be to end the war—either through reconciliation or outright victory.

“But reconciliation is not an option anymore,” Helena said.

Queen Lupis nodded; they had made too many sacrifices. The indignation of the nobles taking part in the northern subjugation had reached its boiling point. Reconciling would make people ask why the northern subjugation even took place, to begin with.

Even if the Mikoshiba barony agreed to make peace, Queen Lupis wouldn't agree to such a thing. The embers that burned under the surface would continue blazing as they had, and any peace they'd

make would be peace in name only. Also, if asked whether the Mikoshiba barony could continue its financial activities as it had before this war, the answer would be a clear no.

“Assume we call off the northern subjugation for now and safely return to the capital. What do you intend to do, Your Majesty?” Helena asked.

After a moment’s contemplation, Queen Lupis said, “Of course, I’ll have to prepare for the next war.”

Queen Lupis didn’t think she’d mount a second northern subjugation. But she could make a declaration denouncing the Mikoshiba barony and begin preparing for another war. She could dispatch another army, even if it didn’t match the northern subjugation army in size.

Realistically speaking, that army would occupy the northern regions, which were currently in a political vacuum. If that was impossible, Queen Lupis would continuously send small units north to impede the Mikoshiba barony’s restoration efforts. At the same time, she could send messengers to the surrounding countries to apply diplomatic pressure. The other countries wouldn’t necessarily care for Rhoadseria’s requests, but this move could disturb the Mikoshiba barony’s economic activity.

Ryoma wasn’t so foolish that he wouldn’t expect her to impede him in such ways if she returned to the capital. Here, he was interested in deciding everything during this war too.

“So if we retreat while intentionally appearing vulnerable...?” Queen Lupis asked.

“Yes, it’s likely he’ll bite. And if we use our superior numbers to crush him, our victory should be assured,” said Helena as she nodded.

Though, this wasn’t to say there wouldn’t be any difficulties, and Meltina was keenly aware of them.

“But to do that, we’d need the nobles’ cooperation... They’re very particular about their dignity. Would they help us with this plan?” added Meltina.

Helena tapped her own chest encouragingly to soothe Meltina’s concerns. “Indeed, we’d need the nobles’ cooperation, but we’d just need to word it in a way that respects their pride and dignity.”

“Meaning?”

“We need to just tell them the truth, that the retreat is a trap to lure Ryoma Mikoshiba out of his fort. Should the enemy remain holed up in their defenses, we’ll convince them that this was because of the northern subjugation. The nobles would tell tall tales of their achievements. Barring the few that are truly too foolish to understand, the majority will see the truth of what happened here. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

Even if the nobles saw what Helena and the other two were scheming, with their reputations and profits on the line, they would help them with this plan. Those who would be too foolish to see what was going on would simply act as planned.

Despite establishing an overall tactic, the main concern was that Helena couldn't take direct command of the nobles' knights. Helena could ask them for cooperation or help, yet she couldn't force them to obey her orders. That said, if they relied on sheer numbers to push through the enemy, they wouldn't need to have a heavy influence. More important than that was maintaining the nobles' morale and vigor.

"I see," said Meltina, finally nodding after listening to Helena's explanation. "In that case..."

In truth, she had no choice but to consent, and so did Queen Lupis. Their expressions were still anxious, but based on how they agreed with Helena, it seemed they had already made up their minds.

When Meltina saw the sorrow in Queen Lupis's face, her heart flared up with anger and bloodlust toward Ryoma.

How regrettable... Why must such a kindhearted woman suffer so much? He's the one who started this all. If we can just kill him... Meltina pondered.

To Meltina, Queen Lupis was a monarch worthy of devoting her life to and following. The fact Ryoma Mikoshiba kept causing Her Majesty so much pain made Meltina burn with anger and hatred. It didn't matter much to Meltina if her judgment was sound. All she wanted to do was to kill Ryoma Mikoshiba, and she clung to that compulsive image.

Neither Helena nor Queen Lupis could say a word to her as there was nothing more to add. The die had already been cast. The three women then looked at each other to confirm their resolve, knowing this was their final hope.

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A few days later, the northern subjugation army gathered in front of Fort Tilt to bring justice to the traitorous Ryoma Mikoshiba began its retreat like a tide receding. While maintaining an orderly formation, they began their march to the southeast, toward the capital.

"So they finally made their move," said Ryoma, who observed the enemy army's movements from atop a lookout tower in Fort Tilt and curled his lips up into a smirk.

It was a cold, ruthless smile, like that of a savage predator who had just laid eyes on their prey. But no animal in existence would be capable of an expression filled with so much scorn, contempt, and

bloodlust. Only humans were capable of this.

Either way, Ryoma could see that his plan had brought this war to its conclusion, and that his long-standing rivalry with Lupis Rhoadserians was about to end.

Chapter 4: The End of the Northern Subjugation

“Your Majesty! The Mikoshiba barony army has moved out in pursuit of us!”

It seemed Ryoma Mikoshiba had finally decided to act. As the messenger ran over and gave their report while gasping for air, Queen Lupis nodded composedly.

It had been a few days since the northern subjugation army began its retreat, and the citadel city of Epirus was in sight. They were in the Runoc Plains, between the Tilt Mountains and Epirus. The location was quite vast, but due to its proximity to the dangerous terrain of the Wortenia Peninsula, Count Salzberg chose not to develop it.

These reasons made it a prime site for a decisive battle. The good visibility on the plains was suitable for deploying a large army, making it advantageous for the northern subjugation army.

Well, not that there are any more places we could use for a major battle, she mused.

Past these plains was Epirus, which had lost all its functions as a citadel at this point. So the northern subjugation army couldn't use it as a defensive position. The Mikoshiba barony would also expose itself to danger by marching its armies all the way to the outskirts of Epirus, making the Runoc Plains the ideal spot.

Meltina sighed in relief upon seeing the battle would occur in the place she had predicted. This didn't guarantee their victory, but she wanted every advantage possible with this gamble, even if it was a small one. She wanted them to, at least, take the initiative.

Upon seeing Meltina nod, Queen Lupis recited, “Very well. Send word to all units, telling them to prepare to intercept the Mikoshiba barony as originally planned!”

Hearing this, the surrounding knights hurriedly ran off to do as she said. Seeing them off, Queen Lupis wrapped her hands around her trembling body. Being told the enemy army was approaching most likely made her anxious, even if she was aware about what was coming.

Meltina placed a cape she was holding on her queen's shoulders and whispered into her ear, “Rest assured, Your Majesty. I promise I will protect you with my life.”

That was a pledge one made with their life and blood on the line.

Queen Lupis nodded in response, for she had no choice but to believe in Meltina's words.

Both armies faced each other on the plains outside Epirus. The northern subjugation army had a hundred fifty thousand soldiers. Meanwhile, the Mikoshiba barony army had roughly fifty thousand men—a gap of three to one.

Queen Lupis's army was in a crane wing formation, meant to capitalize on their superior numbers. As its name implied, the shape enveloped the enemy to wipe them out. Ryoma, by contrast, chose the line formation—a simple arrangement made by soldiers standing in a straight, vertical line.

The two armies glared at each other, and before long, both armies blew horns marking the start of battle.

Once they heard the signal, the two armies began marching. The northern subjugation army went for a frontal attack, hoping to leverage its numerical advantage. But Ryoma was well aware of their plan.

“Nelcius! Cut down the enemy numbers, just as planned!” Ryoma gave the order, bringing a hand to the earring on his right side.

The tool was called “Wezalié's Whisper”—crowned with the name of a subordinate god to Meneos, the God of Light worshiped in the western continent. Its effect was communication using the power of thaumaturgy. Simply put, it was akin to a mobile phone with a few things that set it apart. Rather than using electricity to power itself and phone numbers to make connections, it used prana and a pair of earrings to establish contact.

Also, the distance it could communicate was a limited but effective range of twenty kilometers. Phones could reach out to anyone in the world if one didn't mind the bill. This development was nonetheless revolutionary in a world limited to runners on horseback and carrier pigeons.

And it's thanks to this that I was able to save Sakuya, thought Ryoma.

Had it not been for a spy with a Wezalié's Whisper they had snuck into the northern subjugation army, Ryoma would not have known that Helena had pursued Sakuya. And he might not have made it in time to save her life.

Of course, this wasn't to say Ryoma had no complaints about this tool. The country he envisioned was once where the speed with which information traveled was the most important factor. Not being able to change who he spoke to at will was a fatally limiting factor.

If nothing else, the device showed its worth in this battle because the range of Wezalié's Whisper was wide enough to cover the entire battlefield. Ryoma's words instantly reached Nelcius's ears when he

was two hundred meters behind him in the back of the formation.

“Understood!” said Nelcius, holding his spear to the heavens. At his signal, a unit of half of the ten thousand dark elf soldiers present nocked their bows. These were elites selected among all the dark elf tribes living on the Wortenia Peninsula, making them warriors that exceeded the average knight in strength and discipline.

They aimed at an enemy unit stationed directly opposite the Mikoshiba barony army. The distance between the archers and the enemy was roughly one kilometer. Longbows, which had exceptional flight distance, only had a range of four hundred to five hundred meters, and this distance was nearly twice of their target. On top of that, flight distance was only the range of how far an arrow could reach. In terms of how far arrows traveled while packing enough strength to kill its target, the distance is a third of that.

This would usually be a meaningless attack, but the bows these dark elf soldiers carried were cutting-edge short bows from Myest, acquired as a result of Ryoma’s deal with Ecclesia. They were then modified by the dark-elven craftsmen, so that their range and offensive power would exceed the standard of weapons in this world. Now, they would unleash their astounding performance upon the northern subjugation army.

“The enemy outnumbers us three to one! No need to aim! Fire your arrows up to the sky!”

The bows were pulled back as far as they could go, straining the bowstrings, and the next moment, Nelcius swung down his spear.

“Shoot!”

At Nelcius’s call, the dark elf warriors shot their arrows at once. Without checking the outcome of their first fusillade, he yelled again.

“Prepare the second volley!”

Like he said, they would keep shooting until they ran out of arrows. Nelcius and his troops had their targets obscured because Ryoma’s forces were in front of them and stood in their way. But that didn’t bother the dark elves. All they needed to do was continue shooting their bows and apply pressure to the enemy army. And those arrows were indeed a rain of death that showered over the northern subjugation army’s men.

“Arrows! Hold up your shields!” yelled the commanders on the other side of the battlefield to their troops.

Most soldiers only had simple wooden shields, but given the distance from which those arrows were fired, they should have been sufficient protection. At least, as far as they knew...

“Fool, if they’re shooting from that far away, the arrows will bounce off our armor!” A few of the knights laughed the order off.

But their naive prediction would be shattered the next moment

when the arrowheads lethally sank into the flesh.



The arrowheads' shape was different and unique from that of normal ones, which were triangular, thick, and broad. This form, called chisel-shaped or a "shield buster," was a weapon focused solely on penetrating enemy shields and armor. The bows that fired these arrows were composite bows made of various materials. Normally, composite bows were short, but the dark elves employed short bows with superior power and range.

A shower of arrows rained down on the northern subjugation army with all the might of a rockslide, resembling a scene out of hell. The simple wooden shields snapped from a single arrow and sometimes gouged through the soldiers along with their shields. Even the same tragedy struck the knights in metallic armor. In their case, the arrows didn't penetrate enough to deal fatal damage, but they did dig deep enough to render the knights incapable of fighting.

The Mikoshiba barony's preemptive attack was successful, even if it only affected one area on the battlefield.

"Maintain your formation! March on and crush them!" screamed members of the northern subjugation army who did not get pelted by the arrows.

Lione, who watched over the tides of battle as a commander on the front lines, shouted, "March while maintaining your formations too! No matter what, don't let the formation crumble, ya hear?!"

She led a sturdy force of thirty thousand armored soldiers. Over half of the Mikoshiba barony army consisted of these armored infantry, all of whom fell under the control of the Crimson Lioness, a woman who rose from a mercenary to an army commander.

The armored infantry carried halberds. While their mobility was low compared to a cavalry unit, their metallic armor granted these elites overwhelming defense and durability. These advantages came about from martial thaumaturgy seals that increased hardness and reduced weight. They were the Mikoshiba barony's greatest shield, and the lynchpin of this battle.

Before long, the two armies approached each other and clashed, creating a sea of blood on the battlefield. Needless to say, this was a battle between conscripted commoners and soldiers capable of thaumaturgy clad in equipment reinforced by endowed thaumaturgy. They marched while maintaining the formation of a stalwart wall, protecting the Mikoshiba barony army.

The outcome was all but decided as the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers swung their halberds, cleaving through the northern subjugation army soldiers and reducing them to bloody corpses. Their superiority was no small task. After all, the enemy greatly outnumbered them, and numerical advantage was a significant factor.

As the enemy army washed over them like a tidal wave, Lione skillfully fought to keep them in check.

“Boltz! Have Mike’s unit move in for reinforcements! And have Alex make sure the enemy doesn’t move around us!” As she quickly issued orders, runners sped off to deliver her word. Things were still going according to plan, and Lione’s face showed no signs of unease. *I swear... If we could use this convenient little tool to command the units, we’d have a much easier time. But there’s no point complaining since we can’t gather that many of them.*

The Wezalié’s Whisper had to be made by dark elven craftsmen over a long period, and they had only created five pairs of them, which went to show how precious and rare they were.

Moreover, the fact they were earrings made them ill-suited to the battlefield. Even if one wore two Wezalié’s Whispers, they could only speak to two people at once. The only way to circumvent that would be to change the earrings and reactivate the endowed thaumaturgy, which was quite bothersome and a major flaw.

Ryoma could only communicate with Lione and Nelcius, and Lione could only communicate with the boy and one more person. If she was to issue orders to anyone else, she’d need to rely on messengers on horseback.

But still, this tool’s capabilities give us a major advantage. Seriously, how does the boy come up with ideas like this? Lione thought as she pressed the earring to her ear. “Boy! Everything’s going according to plan on my side! Those two are going to change the formation now!”

“All right. I’m counting on you, Lione!”

At this point, the plan was for Laura and Sara, who led some of the units under Lione’s command, to avoid the enemy army’s pressure and gradually change the formation from a line formation to a triangular formation.

Yeah, it’s going well so far...

As she received reports from each unit, Lione updated the map of the battlefield in her mind in real time.

All that’s left is to find the right time to use the lad’s trump card...

That would be the play that would decide this battle. As the commander on the front line, it was Lione’s role to choose when to use that trump card.

Overcome by the pressure, Lione reflexively reached for the earring on her left ear. But a runner hurried over and delivered a report at which she clicked her tongue. Something unexpected had happened on the right side of the formation, where Sara was commanding the troops.

“See, this is why I hate fighting wars. Nothing ever goes quite as planned!” exclaimed Lione.

The Mikoshiba barony army knew the enemy would try to surround and wipe them out. Seeing they held a vast numerical advantage, that was the kind of tactic that was sure to win this battle for the northern subjugation army. The question was how Ryoma's army would break through this frontal assault.

Such was the reason Ryoma chose the line formation: it was a diversion meant to hide his true plan from the enemy. Despite how simple the line formation was, it still had its advantages.

The fact it was such a basic formation made it easy to change. If the army wanted to ward off the enemy's pressure, they could use Lione's unit as a starting point to go from a line formation to a triangular one. Of course, doing this while on the retreat only made it all the more difficult. It required the commander to be skilled and the soldiers to be very organized.

The most important factor, however, was having the will to not yield to the enemy—for everyone to trust one another regardless of the difference between soldiers and commanders.

Placing Lione at the center of the formation while having Sara and Laura command the flank formations was the right choice. But the cruel reality of war was that making the right choices didn't necessarily mean everything would go according to plan.

"Boy, I'm sorry—the enemy unit overwhelmed us and is charging at Sara's flank!"

The enemy assumed a crane wing formation that increased the surface of their front line, while the triangular formation had the zenith facing toward the enemy. When seeing it from an overhead perspective, the latter was more offensive. However, that was only a one-sided assessment.

Scattering one's formation into multiple small units reduced the number of idle soldiers, allowing troops to coordinate their attacks. In that regard, the triangular formation had a defensive side that allowed for prolonged sustainability.

This plan excelled in defense and offense when Ryoma's army was fighting against a force several times its size. Though, even the most meticulous tactic was useless if it was only good on paper. Many things often went awry on the battlefield. What happened was unexpected as the enemy detachment Sara's force was facing fell apart, which threw her command off kilter.

Apparently, the enemy unit's commander was shot dead by the barrage earlier, likely hit by a stray arrow. This result would have been good news for Ryoma, but that outcome complicated Sara's position. It was like trying to headbutt a target with all the force one could muster, only for it to fall apart too easily and send one tumbling forward from the momentum.

But the misfortune didn't end there. To fill the hole in the wiped-out unit, the surrounding northern subjugation army unit began charging at the right wing, which Sara was leading. They wouldn't usually do this since it'd break formation, though superior numbers can prove more effective than an organized formation.

Angered and driven by the desire to save their allies, the enemy soldiers went on a mad charge. In a way, survival instincts kicked in and spurred them to do so. And their actions were like a stone cast into water, producing a ripple effect that spread throughout the battlefield.

No good. The way this is going, the right wing will fall apart, Lione thought.

As she received that report, she instantly relayed it to Ryoma, who watched over the main force. No words could describe the battlefield and the movement of both armies' banners, including the cheering and shouting of the soldiers.

Even more than that, the air hanging over the battlefield told Ryoma all he needed to know. He understood that this movement wasn't the result of mistaken judgment on Sara's behalf. But it had happened because the enemy commander was trying to close the hole that arose in their formation. Or perhaps it was simply the misfortune of that enemy officer dying to a stray arrow. Whichever it was, the commander's swift judgment made the situation swing in their favor.

So what do I do? Send in reinforcements from the main force? No, sending in my troops now would be a bad idea. In which case... Ryoma thought.

Ryoma had ten thousand cavaliers under his command meant to guarantee their win. Regardless of the situation turning against him, he couldn't afford to lower his unit's numbers.

No choice, then. I have my misgivings about sending them out to the front lines, but I'll have to have Nelcius and his troops set out!

The enemy army would wipe out Sara and the right wing if they didn't gain momentum, putting the entire Mikoshiba barony army on the back foot. So if he had a hand to play, he couldn't hesitate and had to use it.

Doing so would come at a hefty price, of course. He would be pretty much declaring that he was in an alliance with the demi-humans. How that would affect things in the future was hard to tell since anything could happen. But it risked the holy war from centuries ago breaking out again.

Nonetheless, whatever the price Ryoma might have to pay wouldn't matter if his army lost here.

"Nelcius! Show me what the Mad Demon can do. Go around the enemy and tear off one of their wings!" commanded Ryoma, pressing

a hand to his earring.

“Understood! We will move in to assist the right wing division!” he replied concisely while still firing his bow on the other side.

However, there was a clear cheer in his voice. Nelcius commanded the archers in the back of the formation, but as a warrior, he longed to fight directly. Reacting to Nelcius’s fervor with a wry smile, Ryoma roused the surrounding soldiers.

“Understood?! Hold on until Nelcius strikes at the enemy’s flank!” Ryoma’s words made the soldiers behind him cheer loudly.

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Moving in a counterclockwise direction, Nelcius charged in to attack the flank of the enemy formation, seeking to cut into the enemy’s crane wing formation. As he charged toward the area of the battlefield where cavaliers and soldiers ran about, Nelcius twirled his trusty spear.

Following him was a force of five thousand dark elves—elites incorporated into the archer unit. Among them was Dilphina’s Black Serpent unit clad in leather armor, racing through the battlefield with agility and speed that matched the cavalry. With their physical powers bolstered by martial thaumaturgy and the protection of the spirits granted to them by verbal thaumaturgy, they moved with all the might of savage animals in human form.

Their faces were all fixed with expressions of great determination and resolve, as this battle was a war for the survival of their species. If Ryoma lost this war, the Mikoshiba barony would be annexed by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and the Wortenia Peninsula’s demi-humans would suffer greatly.

And so, their resolve burned with great vigor as Nelcius, the one most aware of the possibilities, led the charge.

“Who are you?! Identify yourselves!” declared a burly knight clad in full armor who stood in Nelcius’s way, wielding a large warhammer in one hand.

His expression wasn’t visible behind his helmet, but his voice was thick with disgust and hatred at the fact that he was facing nonhumans. But the flames of the knight’s hatred did nothing to faze Nelcius. He wordlessly thrust his spear into the eye slits of the man’s helmet with all the fluid speed and accuracy of a spear god.

Once the knight crumpled to the ground dead, Nelcius withdrew his spear and raced deeper into the enemy lines, seeking his next prey without glancing at the man he slew. Right now, only one thing mattered to Nelcius: bringing victory to Ryoma Mikoshiba.

“Dilphina,” he ordered his daughter, who followed behind him. “Lead the Black Serpents and take a bite out of the enemy lines!”

She flashed a savage smile, nodded, and said, "Yes, father. I will prove my strength as the Mad Demon's daughter."

This was an oath on her life made to her beloved father, so Dilphina charged into enemy lines to bathe in the blood and screams of her enemies.

†

Ryoma watched over the situation in the center of the formation, keenly noticing when the enemy army wavered. A crane wing formation was well suited to surrounding and wiping out an enemy army. But its weakness was that the flanks of the formation became vulnerable spots.

With the knowledge of this shortcoming, Ryoma's orders were appropriate. Thanks to Nelcius and his group answering his expectations as well as putting up a valiant fight, the northern subjugation army's crane wing formation was gradually falling apart.

But this was only the signal for his next scheme to unfold.

"Good, the time is right. Lione, let's tie this up!" shouted Ryoma.

Hearing his order, Lione nodded and responded, "Aye, boy. You better prepare too!" She pressed her hand to her earring and issued the order to the trump card hidden in the northern subjugation army. "We're countin' on ya! Begin!"

The effect of the order immediately began weakening the northern subjugation army. At first, it was nothing but a single doubt voiced by someone in the army.

"Hey, are you sure this is all right?"

That whisper wasn't directed at anyone in particular, but somehow everyone heard it clearly. A few people reacted to it, and they all did so similarly.

"What are you saying?! How does any of this look all right to you? Just focus on killing the enemies in front of you!"

"Seriously! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

Their response was natural. Nelcius's dark elf warriors were repeatedly charging at them nonstop, each skilled in martial and verbal thaumaturgy. The average knight was no match for them, which meant the northern subjugation army's only chance at winning them would be by overwhelming them with superior numbers. Even then, they had to fight while preparing to die.

So, it made sense that they couldn't let their minds wander at this moment. But that soldier ignored them and continued injecting the poison of anxiety into their veins.

"But if we keep fighting like this, we'll end up trapped by the enemy!"

Everyone present knew this would happen. After all, Nelcius's

charge was cutting the crane wing's formation section in half. The result went without saying as everyone felt what the soldier said and wished they could look away from reality. Still, they were soldiers, and their only way to survive was by fighting.

And yet, the moment someone put that feeling into words, it made the soldiers' hearts waver. The possibility of being trapped amidst the enemy scared them to no end. Then a second blow struck, furthering their anxiety.

"Hey! The main headquarters, where Her Majesty is—it's retreating!"

The moment they heard those words, the soldiers couldn't help but look back at their main headquarters. At this point, the northern subjugation army's formation hadn't budged. Even Queen Lupis approached this showdown with a great deal of resolve.

But the soldiers did not know how Queen Lupis felt, especially in the midst of battle. They wouldn't be capable of being rational at a time like this. The smallest wavering in their hearts would be enough to ripple into a massive wave.

"You're right, the main headquarters' banner is moving."

None of them could tell how much truth there was to that claim. Perhaps the banner was simply flapping in the wind, which made it seem like it was moving. But people didn't believe what was true because they'd rather believe in their preconceptions.

Finally, the moment was upon them.

"Betrayal! Viscount Romaine betrayed us!"

"Count Adelheid as well! Be careful! They're coming to attack us from behind!"

The poison of suspicion seeped up from every corner of the battlefield, ignoring any sounds of clashing swords or shouting. Having the northern subjugation army be an amalgam of different noble armies was its greatest weakness. All the soldiers knew that none of the nobles participated in this war out of loyalty or trust in this kingdom, meaning they couldn't disregard false rumors. The soldiers afflicted by that poison could only look around suspiciously at how everyone moved, unable to discern what was true or fake.

When their doubts and tension reached fever pitch, one soldier stabbed a Romaine viscounty knight that stood in front of him in the back. This was how misunderstanding and misinterpretation led to hatred and bloodlust.

"Idiot, what are you doing?!"

"He was on our side!"

"Shut up, traitors! I'll kill the lot of you!"

As screams flew about and weapons clashed, the battlefield descended into chaos. What was true and what was a lie didn't matter

to anyone anymore. Everyone only thought of killing one another to ensure they survived. Consequently, northern subjugation army soldiers slashed their swords and thrust their spears without regard for friend or foe.

Yet they were unaware their actions were the handiwork of a small group that intentionally triggered this situation. Eventually, the nobles began acting in self-defense.

“Out of the way. We retreat!”

“Fighting any longer is pointless! The Mondo barony army goes on the retreat!”

Their choice was understandable, given the situation. Despite their surface-level loyalty to the Rhoadserian royal house, they still needed to protect their families. But their decision sealed the northern subjugation army’s defeat.

The units trying to advance and the units trying to retreat became jumbled together. At this point, the northern subjugation army lost all semblance of organization and control.

Taking note of the disturbance in the enemy army, Ryoma smirked viciously and said, “The Igasaki clan did their job well!”

The ninjas that had snuck into enemy ranks beforehand were valuable for gaining this information.

Nobles had conscripted many commoners to bolster the ranks of the northern subjugation army, which came at the cost of dropping the quality of the troops. This move was an especially critical issue regarding coordination between troops and trust within the unit. After all, they had composed units on the spot with no preparation. They might be able to match names to the faces of their platoon members, but with members of the same company, it was doubtful they’d know anyone.

That would mean the groups formed within such an army would have weak human relations with each other, making it easy to sneak spies into their ranks. Additionally, the Igasaki clan were ninjas who made sneaking into enemy territory to perform sabotage and spread false information their expertise. Once people’s hearts were tainted with a fire of terror, their rationality would diminish.

“Lione! Let’s finish this!” cried Ryoma.

“Aye, boy, leave it to me!” Lione agreed and made the final preparations. “Begin!”

At her order, the wall of heavy infantry who had focused on defense to minimize losses marched forward. The line formation had become triangular, thanks to Nelcius’s forces and the Igasaki ninja buying the time necessary for the troops to move.

Lione drove the tip of the triangular formation into the enemy’s formation like a spear to drive a hole into their ranks. Countless

enemy units then formed a stalwart wall.

But Lione had a ploy to break through them. She gave the final order, “Open the way!”

The triangular formation parted to the left and right, like Moses parting the Red Sea, revealing a way directly to Queen Lupis. Five thousand cavaliers charged forward, with Ryoma Mikoshiba leading them.

This army commander led a do-or-die maneuver called a Crescent Moon formation. This was a dangerous tactic that meant braving the risk of death in combat. Since the plan was optimized for a frontal assault, it was vulnerable to attacks from the flanks. By taking part in the attack, the commander would be unavailable to command the rest of his forces.

Said strategy offered the greatest offensive powers compared to others, like the triangle, arrowhead, and serpent formations. And so Ryoma continued his charge toward the enemy formation, where Queen Lupis was located.

“Tear through the enemy formation!” Ryoma howled, swinging his favored cross spear and blasting through the enemy soldiers.

All that remained was to proceed with this headlong rush. For Ryoma, who had activated the fifth chakra located in his throat, Vishuddha, to reinforce his body, riding through this confused army was no different from galloping down an open road. Before long, Ryoma faced the enemy’s main force, and his eyes perceived a woman sitting on horseback.

At that moment, Ryoma let out a roar that shook the entire battlefield, “Lupis Rhoadserians!”

It was a roar of vengeance, let out by a gleeful, bloodthirsty demon. Looking upon Ryoma, Queen Lupis went pale. She didn’t expect the enemy to have penetrated this deeply into their forces, nor was she able to keep up with the rapid changes in the situation.

Her body stiffened in fear, and she couldn’t even flee. But the same didn’t apply to Meltina, who was beside her.



“You fools! Defend the queen with your life!” said Meltina, then she grasped the reins of Queen Lupis’s horse and began swiftly retreating.

It was a wise, swift decision. If nothing else, Meltina’s choice to retreat impressed Ryoma. But this wasn’t to say he would let Queen Lupis get away.

“Out of my way!” With that declaration, Ryoma’s spear swept through the royal guards who had acted on Meltina’s order to defend the women’s retreat.

But one knight stood in Ryoma’s way as he attempted to give chase. He wore full plate armor and a helmet. His face was hidden behind the helmet, but Ryoma immediately guessed his identity.

The force and speed of his spear are far beyond those of any average knight. Only one man in this army could be this skilled with a spear.

Ryoma then asked with a mocking smile, “Chris... That’s unexpected. Are you sure leaving Helena’s side was wise?”

Chris removed his helmet, holding it under his arm, to reveal a beautiful face curled into a smile. He responded, “How is it unexpected? We are enemies, you and I. Isn’t it natural we would meet on the field of battle?”

He was right. They may have once been on the same side, but once Helena sided with Queen Lupis, Ryoma and Chris became on different sides of this conflict.

“Are you here on Helena’s orders?”

“Yes. She said we must protect Her Majesty’s life at all costs...”

“I see... She said that, did she?” asked Ryoma, nodding. *Helena really does give some cruel orders...*

Perhaps Chris imagined it, but when he said those words, there seemed to be a hint of pity in his voice.

Ryoma wasn’t sure how serious Helena was about winning this battle. As long as Queen Lupis remained alive, the northern subjugation army could attempt a resurgence. In that regard, placing Chris—who was a simple knight, despite being her right-hand man—with defending the queen was a reasonable choice. He did so even if he became a disposable pawn.

But there was no pain or self-pity to Chris’s expression. Instead, his face was brimming with fighting spirit.

“I have no qualms with her decision. Protecting Her Majesty is the natural duty of a Rhoadserian knight. Besides, I’ve always wanted to have a serious match with you once, Lord Mikoshiba.”

With that said, Chris put on his helmet once more. The time for pleasant chitchat was at an end, it seemed. Ryoma glanced behind Chris and sighed. Meltina and Queen Lupis were nowhere to be seen,

and only more soldiers lay beyond.

Too late already... Ryoma thought. In this case, fighting Chris wasn't a bad option. He kicked his horse's side into a charge and thrust his spear as he said, "How about a gamble, Chris? If I win, you'll have to serve me!"

Chris reacted by doing the same and charging his horse forward. Both men thrust their spears at their respective opponent's faces, but both opening attacks only cut through air. The two turned around and faced each other once more.

Phew... That was close. I only dodged it thanks to the martial thaumaturgy, but that was a real close call.

Ryoma breathed in relief—he somehow tilted his head and dodged Chris's attack. But the same was true of Chris. His expression wasn't visible from behind his helmet, but the air about him made his thoughts clear to Ryoma.

But Ryoma couldn't waste his time admiring Chris's spear skills. He didn't intend to kill Chris here but wouldn't go easy on his opponent.

"Let's go!"

With those words as their signal, the two warriors spurred their steeds to move and closed the distance. This time, however, they chose not to thrust but to swing at each other. The spears held aloft clashed with a loud clang. It was two great forces pushing against one another in the unstable situation of fighting on horseback, putting the ability to wield such power to the ultimate test.

They clashed while swinging heavyweight spears like twigs, exerting all their might, trying to break each other's posture. But this wasn't just about pure strength. The two thrust, swung down, then up, swept, changing movements in quick succession as their opponent tried to block and dodge the blows.

Their battle lasted for some time, going beyond ten or twenty clashes. As the battle raged on, they likely exchanged over a hundred moves as they clashed and tested one another's strength.

"Amazing," uttered someone in amazement.

At some point, Mikoshiba barony soldiers surrounded the two, but no one dared interfere in the battle. In their eyes, Ryoma and Chris's duel felt like proof of what a warrior's life should be. However, this match that seemed to last forever suddenly ended.

Ryoma slipped past a wide swipe and thrust his spear, which hit Chris directly all in the blink of an eye. Chris's helmet flew away, and his body fell off his horse and crashed into the ground. However, this outcome made Ryoma feel humiliated.

"You..." Ryoma whispered, his eyes fixed on an arrow thrust into the ground.

The arrow flew toward Ryoma just as he was about to thrust. Knowing that it would render him defenseless, Chris swept the arrow away, fully understanding Ryoma would strike.

“Why?” Ryoma got off his horse and asked Chris, who lay on the ground.

This was a battlefield. Regardless of any one-on-one duels, arrows could come flying from any direction. Ryoma wouldn’t have blocked that arrow to save an enemy. He considered such unexpected accidents as part of the condition of a match.

Chris, however, met Ryoma’s question with a smile.

“It was just...something of a whim.” Chris said as he looked for his spear, which had also fallen to the ground.

Apparently, the blow he took to his head left his mind muddled as he struggled to find his weapon. Seeing him earnestly fumble in search of his spear made Ryoma sigh and order the surrounding soldiers to give him his spear. One of the soldiers obliged, picked up the spear from the ground, and handed it to Chris.

“Are you sure you should have done that?” questioned Chris, tilting his head at Ryoma.

For a warrior on the battlefield, handing your foe their weapon seemed like a foolish thing to do. Ryoma, though, shrugged and bent his knees, holding his spear perpendicular to the ground. This stance was basic but the key to the most advanced spear techniques.

“Let’s just say I acted on something of a whim too,” said Ryoma, smiling

“Very well...” said Chris, nodding curtly and holding up his spear too. His face was full of the excitement and glee of a warrior. “As for your gamble from earlier, I accept. Assuming I survive this match, though.”

At that moment, Chris’s presence changed entirely. If until now it felt like raging flames, now it had the coldness of a glinting blade. Despite him being full of fighting spirit, the aura he gave off now was the opposite of that.

Ryoma met Chris with much the same aura—the atmosphere of two warriors, each preparing to put their all into a single strike. The two warriors’ auras were like a barrier around them, isolating them from those around them.

The two inched closer toward each other. And then, the moment was upon both.



Both of them let out animalistic howls, then jabbed spears that whooshed from their hips and became invisible to the eyes of the surrounding soldiers.

But the next moment, the soldiers saw Chris's spear spin through the air above them as it was knocked out of his hand. Ryoma had caught Chris's spear with his own, using the cross spear's sickle portion to throw it into the air.

The soldiers raised their voices in a cheer. That was when this battle with the northern subjugation army reached its conclusion. And the soldiers could all reflexively tell—today's victory would be the rising of the curtain on the battle that would decide Rhoadseria's new ruler.

Epilogue

Countless corpses littered the ground, with obscene amounts of blood flowing like rivers and moans occasionally heard here and there. Sadly, it wasn't likely anyone would help them.

After all, the battle atop the Runoc Plains had already been decided. Since Queen Lupis's northern subjugation army began to flee toward the capital, Pireas, it was clear the winner was the Mikoshiba barony, who were giving pursuit.

Both sides in this struggle were leaving the Runoc Plains, and neither side was bothered by the well-being of the soldiers lying on the battlefield. The gravely wounded were doomed unless they could walk alone or rely on their fellow soldiers for help.

No one on the battlefield remained to help those unfortunate soldiers... Or rather, there was someone who could save them. Those were the soldiers of the Church of Meneos who had no intention of offering them any aid.

To them, infidels who didn't believe in the Church's doctrine were enemies to be wiped out. Rhoadseria worshiped the God of Light Meneos, meaning they were all believers of the same deity.

And yet, Rhoadseria didn't follow the teachings of the Church of Meneos and did not acknowledge the pope as Meneos's earthly representative. Significantly, the ones who joined this war were members of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, the most skilled members of the Church's army.

They were infamous for their heretic hunts, having the mission of hunting down demi-humans and others to make the glory of the Church of Meneos known throughout the continent. To the Rhoadserian people, they were better known as the Colsbarga Grave Diggers, instigators of the Tragedy of Gromhen. Either way, they had no mercy to spare for infidels. In their eyes, the only good infidel was a dead infidel.

When Cardinal Roland heard the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights was dispatched to the area, Rodney saw him click his tongue in an unusual display of dislike. But their fanatical belief was part of what made them so proficient in battle. And on that day, Rodney understood this better than ever before.

Tachibana, who stood nearby, was in much the same mental state. What he'd just seen utterly shocked him.

Such skill, Rodney thought.

Standing in front of Rodney was the captain of the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights, Dick McGall, holding a bow. He was clad in the Church's armor and had his face covered in a great helmet, hiding his expression.

How he carried himself made it clear Dick was no ordinary knight. The weapon he used was truly well crafted and worthy of the title "great bow." Unlike ordinary longbows, which usually employed durable wood, this one was made entirely of metal. Using this material would result in a stronger weapon, just as how crossbows were made.

But those were mechanical bows using pulleys and the principle of leverage to pull the string. Since Dick's bow didn't have the mechanism, carrying out this action would require even more physical strength. Needless to say, a metallic bow was much heavier than a wooden one. Special made-for-order arrowheads would need to be used.

Every piece of this set was particularly made, one that the average person couldn't handle. But the man before them wielded that monster of a bow with ease. Even for someone capable of martial thaumaturgy, this was shocking.

In the Holy City, people mocked them as a mishmash of knights.

Normally, the Church of Meneos only had ten knight orders. When the first pope established the organization as an armed group, he established them after the ten angels protecting the God of Light Meneos. There shouldn't have been an eighteenth knight order, but the reason behind that was related to the hundreds of years of their history. At this point, there were twenty-five knight orders in the Temple Knights, and that number only seemed poised to increase.

Since the Church of Meneos became more widespread in the western continent, and its influence spread from the southwestern corner of the continent to other regions, the ten orders the Church originally had weren't enough to cover that much turf. When faced with that predicament, the pope at the time ordered establishing an eleventh knight order as a temporary measure.

With this, the first ten knight orders were stationed in Menestia as a defensive garrison while the eleventh and above orders functioned like mercenaries dispatched to other countries. The positioning stopped dissent within the Church and allowed it to remain consistent with its doctrine.

This is why most of the Temple Knights from the first to tenth orders were born and raised in Menestia and have family relations with high-ranking members of the Church.

Cases like Rodney, who wasn't born in Menestia, existed. But they

were all elites born of pedigree and the children of believers. Many could trace their family's affiliation with the organization to its founding days. There was a weight to their history of being faithful devotees for over a century.

By contrast, the orders branded as eleven and above were mostly of a commoner background. There were a few members of noble families, often those with severed ties or who had their families wiped out for some reason. The greatest difference was that they had all been part of the Church for a few years, perhaps a few decades. They were considered either outsiders or second-generation adherents. In modern terms, they were like a pop star's bandwagon fans, unlike those that followed that star since their early days.

But that's what makes them follow the dogma more passionately than anyone else. They need to prove their faith.

Such was the reason the higher numbered orders were seen as mad zealots, even if the mocking and scorn they received contained a hint of fear and dread. This was because whenever popes decided to purge members or groups with the Church of Meneos, they relied on these zealot mercenaries to carry it out. The scorn others showed them did not lead Rodney astray; he was still wary of those knight orders.

In terms of combat experience, the knight orders sent to other countries have much more practical knowledge than the ones defending Menestia.

No matter how much training one had, it couldn't match experience on the battlefield. Despite that, Rodney didn't truly understand how fearsome they were until now.

I didn't think they were this skilled...

Rodney was one of the more skilled members of the Temple Knights and had combat experience to back it up. His expertise lay with the sword, but he was also proficient with the bow and spear. But he knew he couldn't match Dick's mastery of the bow.

This thing probably has a range of over one kilometer.

That distance exceeded anything Rodney was familiar with. The Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights had positioned themselves on a small hill far behind Queen Lupis's formation. It was a good vantage point overlooking the Runoc Plains and allowing a good view of the battle. With martial thaumaturgy to augment one's sight, it would be possible to spot Ryoma Mikoshiba in that area.

On the other hand, an arrow fired from this hill would surely travel long distances unimpeded. Dick would have no difficulty handling such a monstrous bow, but even Rodney could use it to fire an arrow that far.

But that only has to do with having an arrow reach that far. Locking blades with the enemy army is a different story.

Even if Rodney could fire the bow at such a distance, having the

arrow accurately hit the target would be impossible. This implied these events weren't a coincidence. Cardinal Roland most likely ordered them to take a position on this hill so they would have a vantage point.

In this battle, the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights only served as the rear guard, and they remained as a reserve fighting force. Rear guards served an important role because they could help their allied troops in an emergency or take advantage of an enemy opening to launch a surprise attack. To fulfill their role, staying on this hill was a good idea. However, that was assuming they intended to participate in this battle.

I felt something was off when I heard Cardinal Roland had all our forces stay put on this hill rather than leave some as lookouts.

These orders were the reason behind Rodney's unease. The strategy manuals he had read mentioned the advantages of being deployed on high ground, which was why he didn't object to Cardinal Roland's order. But deploying atop a hill like this meant they wouldn't be able to move as freely as a rear guard unit needed to do so.

This means he didn't intend to fight the Mikoshiba barony army directly. And Queen Lupis knows our intentions.

A rear guard with no intention of fighting was nothing more than an army of observers—this was the only way to describe the Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights here. Even though the Mikoshiba barony army was locked in combat right in front of them, they did nothing but watch the whole time.

Rodney was unaware that Cardinal Roland and Queen Lupis had discussed this situation. If they hadn't done so, Queen Lupis would have sent a message to them asking for help once the tides turned against her. The fact she hadn't meant she didn't expect any aid from the Church.

But I can understand why she did it in her position.

Queen Lupis needed to use the authority of the Church to validate her cause, but she also didn't want to risk having to take needless debts from them. Since the northern subjugation army had the numerical advantage, she didn't need to depend on the church, and there was no necessity to have the organization's forces fight either. From Cardinal Roland's perspective, the pope only ordered him to look into Baron Mikoshiba. His involvement in this war was only a means of gathering information, not helping Queen Lupis win.

One could say that Cardinal Roland didn't care which side won. The Eighteenth Order of the Temple Knights didn't march in this battle because Queen Lupis didn't want to owe them a favor, and Cardinal Roland didn't want unnecessary losses.

And Cardinal Roland accomplished his task.

He achieved this by firing a single arrow at Ryoma Mikoshiba. In the face of that, the northern subjugation army's flight was inconsequential. Meanwhile, the man who fired said arrow stood there calmly as if relishing the changing situation.

If nothing else, he didn't seem upset at failing to shoot Ryoma. Had Dick intended to kill his opponent, he could have mobilized his order to move and pursue him, but he didn't do that. This wasn't to say there were no problems whatsoever, though.

"My apologies, Cardinal Roland. You worked hard to make all those adjustments, and yet..." Dick said.

He apologized for failing to shoot Ryoma down, but his tone made it clear he didn't mean it. Rather, it was a formal apology.

Cardinal Roland magnanimously said, "Don't let it bother you. We only did it to test his abilities. So long as we did that, I have no complaints."

As Rodney expected, Cardinal Roland didn't care if the arrow hit or missed.

"To think he sensed the arrow and used his spear to flick it off." Dick muttered. "I held back a little, but Ryoma Mikoshiba and the young man he was fighting were quite skilled."

Rodney couldn't see Dick's face over the helmet, and there was some excitement in his voice at seeing warriors capable of deflecting his arrows. It showed his confidence that no man alive could fully block his arrows. He had an absolute belief in his abilities that allowed him to easily admit the prowess of others.

Cardinal Roland reacted with a smile and responded, "That was likely Helena Steiner's rumored protégé, Chris Morgan. Despite his young age, his talents with the spear are quite storied."

Dick settled into silence upon hearing this, like he was thinking about something.

"Chris Morgan? I see," said Dick. Finally remembering what that name brought to mind, he laughed out loud. "Oh, yes, I thought the name was familiar. His grandfather, Sir Frank, was a knight who served as Helena Steiner's aide alongside Bark Warren. Sir Frank was a master spearman, praised as the Shooting Star. It seems he trained the young Chris."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I suppose it stands to reason he would be the aide of Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War at that age."

Normally, Chris would have been much too young to serve as Helena's aide, but it was clear they didn't give him the role for appearance's sake. It would only be natural to think Chris had a special form of education. Someone coming from a good family or drawing on the blood of a lauded soldier didn't mean they would be skilled. It was training given at a young age that allowed such talent

to bloom early.

Of course, Chris would balk at that explanation after years of mistreatment and exclusion by General Albrecht. His position as Helena's aide and his fearsome spear skills were all the fruit of great talent and steady practice.

But it was only natural it appeared that way to others, as Rodney and Cardinal Roland agreed with this reasoning. But to Dick, Chris being Frank's grandson was trivial. All that mattered to him was that Chris could deflect his arrow.

"Either way, he is worthy prey for my bow. I want to fight him seriously once," Dick continued, giving the highest praise one warrior could extend to another. He felt like he was lucky enough to stumble upon an unexpected gem.

"I see... If you, captain of the Eighteenth Order, The Heavenly Bow, offer this much praise, young Chris must surely have the makings of a hero," said Cardinal Roland after nodding in agreement. After a moment's thought, he slowly shook his head. "But then again, does that not make Ryoma Mikoshiba quite the monster for defeating that young hero?"

There was astonishment and dread to that question, and Dick didn't deny his words. His appraisal of the man was a bit different, though.

"Yes, you're right, Cardinal. However, him being skilled enough to drive the northern subjugation army into a retreat is something we mustn't overlook. His might as a warrior is fearsome, but his skill as a strategist is considerable as well."

Cardinal Roland sighed deeply, adding, "So you think so too?"

"While he may have tacticians aiding him, his skill at cutting into the northern subjugation army's formation implies his prowess as a commander. Even among the Temple Knights, very few of our captains can match his level."

"How dreadful..." said Cardinal Roland with a strained smile. "He almost sounds like some kind of hero of myth."

Ryoma Mikoshiba was proficient as a warrior and as a commander on the battlefield—two traits that rarely came together. Given how well managed the Wortenia Peninsula was, he must also be an adept governor. He was a man skilled in both the literary and military arts. The man being a talented statesman would have been too much to manage.

Still, Cardinal Roland couldn't afford to marvel at Ryoma's talents. If they could get him on their side, he would be a valuable ally. But if he turned against them, he would become a threat.

"His abilities are certified... If we could make him one of our pawns, he would be quite useful. But the problem is his background."

Dick nodded briefly. "So when we confirm his connection to the Organization... We'll have to do it, yes?"

"Yes. We will eliminate him no matter how many sacrifices we must make. He's too dangerous. When that time comes, I will rely on the Eighteenth Order."

There was firm resolve to Cardinal Roland's words; confirming Ryoma's connections to the Organization meant he would resort to killing the young man by any method necessary. Even if it cost the life of every member of the Eighteenth Order, the pope's orders were absolute. What Cardinal Roland said next was something Dick didn't expect.

"We might want to consider requesting reinforcements from the homeland, depending on how things go. In that case, we will ask the First Order to deploy."

Dick seemed to falter. "Deploy the First?" A slight shiver emanated from his voice, expressing dread toward the First Order of the Temple Knights.

"Yes, of course. If worse comes to worst..." replied Cardinal Roland, nodding. "Should the situation be more than you can handle, my only recourse would be to request that the pope send the Grandmaster of the Temple Knights."

Rodney, who had listened to their exchange in silence so far, held his breath upon hearing those words. It was something of a miracle he remained speechless. The captain of the First Order of the Temple Knights also doubled as the Grandmaster of the Temple Knights. He had authority and command over the entire group and all its orders. Furthermore, he was considered the representative of the sword that protected the faith and creed of the Church of Meneos.

Rodney was indeed one of the more skilled members of the Temple Knights, but comparing him to the Grandmaster was like comparing a child to an adult. Three years ago, he faced their leader at a match among the group where the gap between them was visible.

Don't tell me the Grandmaster is actually about to act on this matter. He's His Grace's greatest weapon and the strongest man in the Church.

Based on Cardinal Roland's tone, it seemed the chances of that were slim. However, the problem was that the chances of that weren't nil, and that was proof that the Church of Meneos recognized Ryoma as a threat. This was the worst possible outcome, which Rodney wished wouldn't have happened.

At this point, the conclusion isn't out yet. But...

Cardinal Roland came from Menestia to Rhoadseria to confirm if Ryoma would be a useful pawn against the shadowy group controlling the western continent from the shadows, the elusive Organization. The pope's orders also included handling Ryoma if he was a member of the

group by eliminating him.

Clearly, Rodney was aware of the order since he accepted this mission, and he knew that if things came to this, one girl would shed tears of sorrow.

I was right to have Tachibana confirm Mikoshiba's face.

Usually, the best choice would be to have Asuka confirm it was him. Yet she wouldn't have remained composed if she were here for this. She experienced much hardship to seek her relatives in the many days since Koichiro Mikoshiba parted ways with her. It was perfectly likely she'd burst into tears and lose control of her emotions.

If Cardinal Roland were to see her do so, it would reduce all the effort Rodney made to hide her background from him to nothing. Learning about her connection to Ryoma meant the Cardinal would try to use Asuka.

This was why Rodney left confirming Ryoma's face in Tachibana's hands. And when they saw him during his duel, Tachibana nodded briefly, signaling it was indeed the man Asuka was seeking and one sent to this world from Rearth.

Considering the rumor that many members of the Organization originated from Rearth, the conclusion seemed clear. If Cardinal Roland were to learn of this, Rodney could easily see him acting accordingly.

We have to make a move now.

Simply standing by and watching wouldn't make things take a turn for the better. The more time passed, the more details Cardinal Roland would gather. It would only be a matter of time until Asuka's relationship with Ryoma Mikoshiba came to light.

With that thought in mind, Rodney silently watched Cardinal Roland and listened to his conversation, hoping that he'd be able to protect Asuka.

†

That night, Rodney called Tachibana over. It was past midnight, and come tomorrow, they would set out in pursuit of Ryoma Mikoshiba, who headed for the capital Pireas. Tachibana was hoping to get some rest early, but he couldn't refuse a call from Rodney. And that was all the more true because he had an idea about what Rodney wanted with him.

The warning Rodney gave him beforehand crossed Tachibana's mind. *"Make sure you're not seen"?*

In modern Japan, people might still be awake after midnight. With electric lights, modern civilization conquered the dark of night. But in this world, most people were asleep at this time of night. The ones still awake were limited to sentries patrolling the camp.

Tachibana had kept their routes in mind, which made running into them quite slim. This was because Rodney tasked him with keeping track of the sentries' patrols.

A dangerous but accurate metaphor crossed Tachibana's mind. *I feel like a bank employee robbing his own bank. Guess I've gotten used to this world too.*

That thought made a tinge of loneliness fill his heart. Quite some time had passed since Tachibana was summoned here, so it was only natural he would come around to the ways of this world. His hands were already dirty with blood. He didn't need to cling to his ethics as a police officer since doing so would endanger others.

Yet, Tachibana wasn't strong enough to see the changes he was going through and was indifferent to it. As he walked to his destination, relying on the moonlight and the torches set in key positions around the camp, he had no doubt in his heart.

Rodney predicted things might come to this, thought Tachibana as he snuck between the tents.

Tachibana was currently an attendant in service to the Temple Knights, tasked with managing Rodney's and Menea's personal affairs. In simple terms, he handled odd jobs mostly limited to the former. It wasn't usually his business to participate in the camp's security.

Rodney ordered Tachibana to join the patrols after finishing his daily duties, citing "acquiring combat experience" as the reason. He spent much less time on this duty than a sentry dedicated to these patrols did, which meant it wasn't very demanding work for him. Indeed, he saw it as a type of work experience. The question was, why did Rodney give him that order?

Looking back on it now, the answer is clear. The next patrol is in two hours. Still, I have to be careful since there's no telling where someone might be looking.

Though Tachibana did not know how much Rodney could predict, he had considered several scenarios and made meticulous preparations. He could only think of one thing that would hold Rodney's attention that much, what they had talked about the other day.

Being prepared was important, but no amount of preparation could ever fully defend against unexpected developments. Carelessness at times like these could cause such unforeseen outcomes. Tachibana knew this from experience.

Someone could have come out of bed to relieve themselves, spotted Tachibana, and questioned him. The chances of that were slim but not impossible. When Tachibana was a detective, he arrested criminals based on such coincidences.

So he knew to be careful when he was up to underhanded

business. But at the same time, acting like he was trying to avoid prying eyes would make him look suspicious. After all, most people try to move in the shadows to avoid detection. Doing so came across as unnatural, and if someone were to find Tachibana doing this, he'd be hard-pressed to make an excuse. So while he did move through the shadows, Tachibana tried to remain nonchalant, like he wasn't worried about being seen.

The important part is maintaining balance.

This was the rule of thumb Tachibana came up with during his time as a detective cornering criminals. Tachibana's clothes reeked of alcohol, and he had a bottle of liquor hidden in his clothes. If someone blamed him, he could play the part of a drunk.

Military regulations forbid drinking, which included severe punishment if caught drunk on the job. Still, it made for a believable lie. Thanks to that, he could head for Rodney's designated tent without being too wary.

But when he set foot inside, he was a little surprised.

"It's just me?" he asked. He expected Asuka and Menea to be here for this discussion, but he was wrong. Rodney motioned for him to take a seat. *I see. So that's what this is about...*

He didn't instantly notice that Rodney's expression was quite stiff and serious upon entering the tent. The reason he was here became evident, and he realized why Asuka wasn't present. What they were about to discuss was delicate, so they couldn't risk information about it leaking.

And she's simply too upfront with her emotions.

This was Genzou Tachibana's image of Asuka Kiryuu. She was no fool, though, as she was quite intelligent by the standards of this world. And she was skilled at reading other people's emotions and adjusting to the ambience. More than anything, she was a good-natured person. She couldn't ignore another person in need and had a bright, cheerful, and open-minded personality, for better or worse.

Asuka was the kind of person one would naturally learn to like and had a character that made Tachibana and Rodney care so much about her. In that regard, one could say she didn't have any flaws.

But she's ill-equipped to keep secrets.

Her honesty would normally be a good trait, but this world made that quality a fatal flaw. Rodney knew this, therefore he didn't call Asuka for this.

But why isn't Menea here for this either?

Menea Norberg was Rodney's right-hand woman and his most trusted subordinate. Tachibana couldn't see why she wouldn't be present. But Rodney didn't regard his concerns and went straight to the matter at hand.

“I’ll spare you the niceties. I need you to deliver this letter to that man, Tachibana.”

Rodney handed him a letter sealed with a wax sigil and an emergency pass given to messengers meant to deliver extremely urgent news. With this, he could leave the camp even at night without identifying himself.

So he wants me to deliver this letter to someone.

But the letter didn’t have any names written on it. In other words, its recipient hadn’t been decided yet.

“I understand what I’m supposed to do with the pass, but what about this letter?” Tachibana said as he looked down at the pass. *I believe this is the sigil of the count house Rodney was meant to inherit.*

The wax on the letter didn’t have the seal used by the Church of Meneos imprinted onto it, which was the kind Tachibana saw every day working under Rodney. But he recognized this one, because Rodney once showed him the emblem of House Mackenna, a count noble family from the Kingdom of Tarja.

Yes, that’s definitely House Mackenna’s seal. I thought Rodney cast that title aside. And that was why he and Menea ended up devoting themselves to the Church of Meneos. *Does he simply want this matter to remain unrelated to the Church?*

And since he brought up House Mackenna’s name, this was more than just run-of-the-mill dirty work.

Whoever this letter is addressed to, they’re of high station. Having come to that conclusion, the answer was quite clear. Tachibana knew the answer and asked, “So you want me to take this letter to Baron Mikoshiba?”

“Yes,” said Rodney, nodding. “I have a horse and necessary supplies prepared for you in the back of the tent. I apologize that this is all on short notice, but I need you to take what you need and meet Baron Mikoshiba at once.”

This answered why Menea wasn’t present for this and why Rodney was so cautious.

“Did you decide leaving Asuka alone would be too dangerous?” Tachibana asked.

“I can’t know for sure, but...” Rodney answered. “Based on Cardinal Roland’s conduct, he’s very cautious of Baron Mikoshiba. If he finds out about Asuka, for whatever reason, he’d definitely try to use her to get to him.”

“Like, take her hostage?”

“Or outright execute her if things go bad enough.”

Tachibana sighed at Rodney’s reply. He was sensing there was something off about how the Church of Meneos behaved. He didn’t one hundred percent agree with every decision Rodney made either.

With Baron Mikoshiba, Tachibana had much more of an understanding of how he acted in contrast with the Church. The northern subjugation army's retreat made for a good chance.

Right... If we use the confusion of the northern subjugation army's retreat to Pireas to our advantage, it could work. Tachibana then bowed his head to Rodney as he said, "Understood. I accept this mission."

This gesture reflected a great deal of respect toward Rodney Mackenna and was the most genuine apology Genzou Tachibana could express for not being able to repay him properly for all Rodney did for him. Tonight could be the last time he ever saw Rodney.

It would make sense to express that feeling aloud, but Tachibana couldn't find the words. Stating it verbally would certainly make it their last meeting.

Rodney... I was truly lucky to meet you.

Tachibana was a jaded man who knew what Rodney did for him wasn't strictly out of goodwill. His time as a police officer taught him all too well just how sinful and calculating people can be, and he was aware that this world was far too harsh of a place.

But even if they had a reason to help us, that doesn't matter.

When Misha Fontaine, the court thaumaturgist from the Kingdom of Beldzevia, summoned them into this world, they escaped with Koichiro Mikoshiba's help. Yet they got lost in the woods near the castle. The ones to be kind enough to save them were Rodney and Menea.

It was true that Tachibana was nothing but an extra person they picked up along the way with Asuka. Even so, they'd given him work and all his basic needs for the last few years. The debt he owed them went beyond description.

Tachibana silently left the tent. As Rodney watched Tachibana walk away, he prayed to Meneos to watch over the girl who was like a younger sister to him and was thrown into this world by the whims of fate.

Afterword

I doubt many such are readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. To those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume in March. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

In July, we released volume 19. Four months have since passed, and to my relief, we were able to release this one in a timely manner. We have finally reached the monumental twentieth volume.

Twenty volumes... Honestly, I didn't expect we'd last this far. I had a general outline of the entire story, but if I were to calculate the road there, I'd say we're about halfway through? If this were mountain climbing, we wouldn't be at the peak yet, but if you look down, you'd be surprised by how far we've traveled.

As poets often say, it's amazing how far we've come. After the initial failures of Wortenia's first publication, I seriously believed I'd only see this series to its conclusion in the web novel version! I was very worried then, so I'm truly grateful to the fellow author who introduced me to the publishers at Hobby Japan. In fact, I still see that author fairly often, so one could say we're still on good terms.

Luck is a strange thing in how it brings both good and bad to us. In the four months since volume 19, good and bad things happened. The controversial Tokyo Olympics, the explosive rise in COVID cases. Truly, there was no end of things to talk about.

But what shocked me the most was the case of the Moderna vaccine vials that had foreign substances mixed into them, which I only heard of after I took my second shot of the vaccine. It turned out the vaccine I got was among the ones with the substances in them.

When I saw the news, I felt all the color drain from my face! The news didn't go into what those substances were, and since we got the vaccine in our workplace, our company had to send a heads-up email.

Maybe because it was my second shot, the spot where I took the vaccine turned red, and I got a fever, which only made me more concerned! There wasn't much I could do, and a few days later, it all passed. I was back to normal, and it turned out the dose I took didn't have foreign substances in it. So that was a relief.

Do look after your health, everyone. Really.

But let's put such dark topics behind us and review the volume's highlights, as always. In this volume, Queen Lupis's northern

subjugation army is cornered. A large army means more work to worry about, and just gathering soldiers doesn't mean they'll function properly. In other words, a large army can be much more fragile. But our trusty protagonist set things up that way, the schemer that he is.

Also, the dark elves played a major role in this volume. They got to fight on the front lines and show their worth, but they flourish when working behind the scenes. Expect to see the dark elves take center stage in the future too. Ryoma's country can't exist without them, after all.

The last point of interest in this volume was Rodney and his decision. His choice lays the groundwork for the next volume, undoubtedly becoming a turning point in the story. Do look forward to seeing how it pans out.

Finally, I'd like to extend my thanks to everyone involved in the writing of this volume, and to all the readers who picked it up. In the next volume, the long-running rivalry with Queen Lupis will finally reach its conclusion...

Probably... Surely... I believe.

Vague promises aside, I intend to continue working hard for this series, so please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.









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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 20

by Ryota Hori

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